



The importance of scale in Established – Outsider figurations

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Forty years have passed since the first publication of Elias and Scotson's well-known book 'The Established and the Outsiders'. Since then, many scientists have applied this theory in highly different contexts, which has led to valuable additions and a further refinement of the original theory.

The study of established – outsiders figurations has largely been confined to a single (mostly the local) spatial scale. We argue that this is too simple an approach: the local scale is only one in a nested hierarchy of spatial scales and a local figuration cannot be properly understood without taking into account the relations with other spatial scales.

Elias stated that the core of any figuration is the unequal power balance between established and outsiders and the tensions that reside within. Power is largely based on the amount of social capital a group possesses. Important power sources are key positions in social networks and the possibility of stigmatisation (based on norms and values), which results from strong group cohesion.

These power sources are not only locally based. There is an inescapable dialectical link between, for example, national and local values. The latter clearly contain, respond to, encapsulate, and are constructed from the former. In many cases a figuration on a local scale will be linked to, or even be derived from a similar figuration on higher spatial scales. Figurations are based on a specific classification criterion, such as length of residence, ethnicity, religion or class. The power balance between (for example) ethnic or religious groups in a local community can be very different from the power balance between the comparably classified groups on a regional or national scale. Established and outsider groups can use a strong group position on a higher spatial scale to shift the local power balance in their favour. But this can also work the other way round: national outsiders can try to create a local 'safe haven'.

Empirically, the importance of scale shows in our study of two communities in a peri-urban region at the edge of the Randstad in the Netherlands: Amerongen and Veenendaal. Established – outsider figurations in these communities were historically based on different classification criteria: length of residence and religion respectively. In recent times both communities have encountered a comparable process of urbanisation pressure, leading to an influx of newcomers. In Amerongen, political power is now moving to a higher scale (the local council will merge into a larger municipality), thus undermining the power base of the established. In Veenendaal, orthodox Christians (outsiders on a national scale) have a strong power base. This Christian majority (the established) tends to focus on the local scale, while the local secular outsiders often refer to the national scale. This clearly shows that local shifts in power balances cannot be understood without referring to wider contexts. In our paper we will further explore the relations between local, regional and national figurations, highlighting the importance of scale in established – outsider figurations.

