Dynamics of Group Sports with Special Reference to Football

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It happens quite often in the development of a science, or of one of its branches, that a type of theory which has dominated the direction of research for some time, reaches a point where its limitations become apparent. One begins to see that a number of significant problems cannot be clearly formulated and cannot be solved with its help. The scientists who work in this field then begin to look round for a wider theoretical framework, or perhaps for another type of theory altogether, which will allow them to come to grips with problems beyond the reach of the fashionable type of theory.

What is called 'small group theory' in contemporary sociology appears to be in that stage. It is fairly evident that a good many problems of small groups are beyond the reach of small group theory in its present form, to say nothing of its limitations as a model setting theory for the exploration of larger social units. It did not, at any rate, prove of great help to us when we tried to investigate problems of small groups engaged in sport-games such as football. Confronted with the study of sport groups in vivo, small group theory failed us.¹

We therefore set out—in connection with a wider investigation of the long-term development of football—to explore some of the theoretical aspects of the dynamics of groups engaged in games of this type. It appeared to us that sport-games in general, football in particular, could serve as a useful point of departure for the construction of models of small group dynamics which are somewhat different from those offered within the framework of present-day small group theories. Some aspects

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of such a model are presented in this paper. Although it is built primarily with reference to football, the concepts derived from our analysis may perhaps be of wider use. They almost certainly apply not only to football, but also to other group games.

In studying football and other sport-games, one encounters from the start certain semantic difficulties. People often speak of a game of football as if it were something outside of, and apart from, the group of players. It is not entirely incorrect to say that the same game—a game such as football—can be played by many different groups. At the same time, the pattern of each individual game is itself a group pattern. In order to play a game, people group themselves in specific ways. As the game runs its course, they continually regroup themselves in a manner similar to the ways in which groups of dancers regroup themselves in the course of a dance. The initial configuration from which the players start changes into other configurations of players in a continuous movement. It is to this continuous movement of the configuration of players to which we refer when we use the term 'game-pattern'. The term can be misleading if it makes one forget what one actually observes when watching a game: one observes small groups of living human beings changing their relations in constant interdependence with each other.

The dynamics of this grouping and regrouping of players in the course of a game are fixed in certain respects and elastic and variable in others. They are fixed, because without agreement among the players on their adherence to a unified set of rules, the game would not be a game but a 'free-for-all'. They are elastic and variable, otherwise one game would be exactly like another. In that case, too, its specific character as a game would be lost. Thus, in order that group relations can have the character of a game, a very specific balance must be established between fixity and elasticity of rules. On this balance depend the dynamics of the game. If the relations between those who play the game are too rigidly or too loosely bound by rules, the game will suffer.

Take the initial configuration of players in Association Football. It is regulated by certain rules. Thus, the wording of one of the 1897 rules about the 'kick-off' configuration, which with some qualifications is still valid, is this:

The game shall be commenced by a place-kick from the centre of the field of play in the direction of the opponents' goal-line; the opponents shall not approach within ten yards of the ball until it is kicked off, nor shall any player on either side pass the centre of the ground in the direction of his opponents' goal until the ball is kicked off.²

It is easy to see how much room for manœuvring this kind of rule leaves to the two sides—how elastic it is. Within the framework of the kick-off rules, players can group themselves in a 'W-formation' (2—3—5) or in the form of a 'horizontal H' (4—2—4). If they want to, the defending side may even mass themselves solidly in front of their own
goal, though in practice this is rarely done. How the players actually position themselves at the kick-off is determined by formal rules as well as by convention, by their experience of previous games, and often by their own strategic plans coupled with their expectations of the intended strategy of their opponents. How far this peculiar characteristic, this blend of firmness and elasticity applies to the regulation of human relations in other spheres is a question which may deserve more attention than it has received so far.

From the starting position evolves a fluid configuration formed by both teams. Within it, all individuals are, and remain throughout, more or less interdependent; they move and regroup themselves in response to each other. This may help to explain why we refer to this type of game as a specific form of group dynamics. For this moving and re-grouping of interdependent players in response to each other is the game.

It may not be immediately clear that by using the term ‘group dynamics’ in this context, we do not refer to the changing configurations of each of the two groups of players as if they could be considered in separation, as if each had dynamics of its own. That is not the case. In a game of football, the configuration of players on the one side and that of players on the other side, are interdependent and inseparable. They form in fact one single configuration. If one speaks of a sport-game as a specific form of group dynamics, one refers to the overall change in the configuration of the players of both sides together. Few aspects of the group dynamics of football show as clearly as this the relevance of sport-games as models for the dynamics of groups in many other fields.

A fundamental characteristic, not only of football, but of practically all sport-games, is that they constitute a type of group dynamics which is produced by controlled tensions between at least two sub-groups. For this reason alone, traditional sociological small group theory is not of very great help in the exploration of the sort of problems which confronted us here. These problems require specific concepts different from those used so far in the sociological study of small groups, and perhaps a little more complex than those commonly used in discussions about sport-games. According to present conceptual usage, one might be content with saying that a game of football is played by two different groups. This is one of those linguistic conventions which induce people to think and to speak as if the game were something apart from the human beings concerned. By stressing that the game is nothing but the changing configuration around a moving ball of the players themselves, one brings into focus at the same time that it is not the changing configuration of each of the two teams seen separately, but of the players of both teams together in their struggle with one another. Many people who watch a game of football may know that this is what they try to follow—not merely one team or the other, but the fluid pattern formed by both. This is the pattern of the game—the dynamics of a group in tension.
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As such, this model of group dynamics has theoretical implications beyond the study of small groups. It may be of help for the study of such varied problems as, for example, that of marital tensions, or of union-management tensions. There, as in the case of sport groups, tensions are not extraneous, but intrinsic to the configuration itself; there too, they are to some extent controlled. How and to what degree they are, and how they came to be controlled, is a problem to be studied. Inter-state relations are another example of a configuration with built-in tensions. But in that case, effective and permanent tension control has not yet been achieved and, at the present level of social development and of sociological understanding of groups-in-tension, perhaps cannot be achieved. Among the factors which prevent the achievement of better control is certainly the widespread inability to perceive and to investigate two states in tension or a multi-polar state system as a single configuration. One usually approaches such a system as the involved participant of one side and is therefore not quite able to visualize and to determine the paramount dynamics of the configuration which different sides form with each other and which determines the moves of each side. The study of sport-games like football can thus serve as a relatively simple introduction to a configurational approach to the study of tensions and conflicts—to an approach in which attention is focused, not on the dynamics of one side or the other, but of both together as a single configuration in tension.

Today, sociological thinking with regard to problems of this kind often seems to revolve around two alternatives: problems of group tension stand on one side, problems of group co-operation and harmony on the other. Group tensions appear to be one phenomenon; group co-operation and harmony another. Because one has different words, it appears almost as if the phenomena themselves were different and independent of each other. An analysis of sport-games illuminates the inadequacy of this approach. The group dynamics of a game presuppose tension and co-operation on a variety of levels at the same time. Neither would be what it is without the other.

Traditional small group theory is apt to lead attention away from problems of this type. Its representatives often select for study small group problems in which tensions play no part at all, or if they select for study problems of tension, they confine themselves to specific types of individual tension such as individual competition. In reading their arguments, one often has the feeling that their discussions on the subject of group tensions and conflicts are discussions about questions of political philosophy and political ideals rather than about conclusions derived from strictly scientific enquiries. In this case as in others, contemporary sociology appears at times to be threatened by a polarization between those who are blind to the role of tensions in social groups—or at least who greatly underplay this role—and those who
overplay the role of tensions and conflicts to the neglect of other, equally relevant aspects of group dynamics. Homans, for example, has developed a small group theory in which conflict and tension play at most a marginal part. It is probably not unfair to suggest that this harmonistic tendency is connected with a pre-established scheme of values, a kind of socio-political Weltanschauung which sets the course for theoretical arguments and empirical observations alike. It almost appears as if Homans has developed an emotional allergy to the discussion of tensions and conflicts. Thus, he wrote:

... if we confine ourselves to behaviour... (concerned with the exchange of rewarding activities), we are sure to call down upon our heads the wrath of the social scientists who make a profession of being tough-minded. 'Never play down conflict,' they would say. 'Not only is conflict a fact of social life, but conflict has positive virtues and brings out some of the best in men.' It turns out that these very scientists are no more willing than is the rest of mankind to encourage conflict within any body of men they themselves are responsible for. Conflict is good for other people's subordinates, not their own. But we must refrain. It is all too easy to ask men to practise what they preach. A trap that none can escape is no fun setting. prejudiced.

This, as one can see, is an emotionally charged argument. It shows how greatly Homans himself misunderstands the character of sociological analysis. Without doubt, some writers who focus attention on problems of conflict, do so because they wish to encourage conflict—that is, for reasons extraneous to the sociological study of such problems. But to suggest, as Homans seems to do, that the encouragement of conflict is the only reason why sociologists try to determine the nature of tensions and conflicts in the social life of man implies a fundamental misunderstanding of the task of sociological analysis. Although Homans writes, 'no one can deny... that conflict is a fact of social life', he obviously finds it difficult to deal with this fact simply as such, as one fact of life among others.

In this respect, the study of sport-games can be of considerable help. A specific type of tension plays a significant part in such games. In studying them, one cannot overlook tensions whether one likes them or not. It seemed useful to determine the character of sport-games like football as configurations with tensions of a specific type and we thought that 'groups-in-controlled-tension' would be an appropriate term to express it.

At the present stage of theoretical development one is confronted by a dilemma in these matters which, in a somewhat different context, has been most clearly formulated by Dahrendorf. We have already referred to the tendency to treat conflict and co-operation as independent phenomena and to form different and separate theories, one for each of them.
Dahrendorf encountered a similar problem with regard to integration and coercion, and posed in this connection a significant question:

Is there, or can there be, [he asked] a general point of view that synthesizes the unsolved dialectics of integration and coercion? So far as I can see there is no such general model; as to its possibility, I have to reserve judgment. It seems at least conceivable that unification of theory is not feasible at a point which has puzzled thinkers ever since the beginning of Western philosophy.4

The same might be said with regard to tensions and co-operation. Some sociological theories are woven around problems of conflict and tension without much regard for those of co-operation and integration; others pay regard above all to problems of co-operation and integration, treating conflict and tension more or less as marginal phenomena. From closer range, it is easy to see the reason. Both procedures are based on a reification of values: because one attaches different values to conflict and co-operation, one is apt to treat these phenomena as if they had a separate and independent existence.

A study of sport-games is thus a useful point of departure for an approach to these problems which may allow the passions to calm down. It is easier in this field to move outside the battle of extraneous evaluations and to keep in close touch with testable, factual evidence in framing theoretical propositions. It is less difficult, therefore, to move towards a unified theoretical framework within which both tension and co-operation can find their place as interdependent phenomena. In football, co-operation presupposes tension, and tension co-operation.

However, one can clearly perceive their complementary character only if one studies how the game has developed to its present form where tensions and co-operation are related to each other through firm types of control. The study of the long-term development of football enabled us in fact to see in a limited field, one aspect of the interplay between tension and tension-control without which the relevance of sport-games as a theoretical model cannot be fully understood. It showed how tensions which were at one time uncontrolled and probably uncontrollable were gradually brought under control.

In its present form, one of the central characteristics of Association Football and many other sport-games is certainly the manner in which the often fairly high group tensions engendered in the game are kept under control. But this is a fairly recent attainment. In former days, tensions between players, which were and are at all times characteristic of games, were often far less well controlled. This transformation, the development of a highly regulated, relatively non-violent form of group tension, from an earlier stage where the corresponding tensions were much more apt to discharge themselves in one or another form of violence, is at the core of the long-term dynamics of the game of football. It is representative—one might almost say symbolic—of certain aspects
of the long-term development of European societies. For within many of these societies the general level of overt violence has diminished over the ages. There, too, one encounters, as one does in the development of football, both a higher level of organization and higher levels of self-restraint and of security compared with the past. How and why this long-term development towards more ‘civilized’ standards of human relations occurred in society at large need not concern us here. But we were able to find out, and we shall indicate in our forthcoming book on that subject some of the reasons why a game like football developed, in connection with similar trends in society at large, from a more to a less violent and uncontrolled form and correspondingly to a different form of game-pattern—of group dynamics. This understanding of the long-term dynamics of football greatly assists that of the short-term dynamics of the game as played today. It may be useful to illustrate the general direction of the former by means of two examples.

As played in earlier ages, not only in England but also in many other countries, football, like most ball games, was a very wild game indeed. Richard Carew, writing in 1602, has described one of the ancestral versions—a blend of handball and football which was then called ‘hurling’—as follows:

The hurlers take their way over hilles, dales, hedges, yea and thorow briars, mires, plashes and rivers whatsoever, so as you shall sometimes see thirty lie tugging together in the water scrambling and scratching for the ball... The ball in this play may be compared to an infernal spirit, for whosoever catcheth it fareth straightways like a madman, struggling and fighting those who go about to hold him... [The game] is accompanied by many dangers... for the proof whereof, when the hurling is ended you shall see them returning home as from a pitched battle with bloody pates, bones broken and out of joint, and such bruises as serve to shorten their days, yet all is good play and never attorney or coroner troubled for the matter.

Centuries later, between 1854 and 1862, when the playing of football, at least in some of the leading public schools, had become much more highly regulated, the level of permitted violence was still very much higher than it is today and the dynamics of group tensions were therefore rather different. Thus, among the regulations of the game produced at Rugby in 1845 were the following three rules:

1 No player may wear projecting nails or iron plates on the soles or heels of his shoes or boots.
2 No hacking with the heel or above the knee is fair.
3 A player standing up to another may hold one arm only, but may hack him or knock the ball out of his hands if he attempt to kick it or go beyond the line of touch.

As late as 1863, the incipient Football Association split because the majority proposed to eliminate ‘hacking’ altogether from the game, while
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a minority of the founder members held to the view that the abolition of hacking would make the game ‘unmanly’ and opposed it. This was not the only, but certainly one of the major points which led to the development of two types of football in England. Association Football, or ‘soccer’, on the one hand, and Rugby Football, or ‘rugger’, on the other. It is interesting to note that even in the rugby game, although the general level of violence remained somewhat higher than in Association Football, hacking was also ‘outlawed’ not very long after the break occurred.

The problem we encountered here—a problem not entirely without theoretical significance—was that of the reasons why one of the two types of football, namely ‘soccer’, gained very much wider recognition and success than the other, not only in England but almost the world over. Was it because the level of violence in soccer was lower than in rugby? In order to answer questions such as this one needs a very clear idea of at least one of the central problems that resulted from the lowering of violence for the whole pattern of the game, for its group dynamics. The danger of this decrease of permitted violence was quite obviously that the game in its changed form would become uninteresting and dull. The survival of the game evidently depended on a peculiar kind of balance between, on the one hand, a high control of the level of violence, because without it the game was no longer acceptable to most players and most spectators in accordance with the now prevailing standards of ‘civilized’ behaviour, and on the other hand, the preservation of a sufficiently high level of non-violent fighting without which the interest of players and public alike would have flagged. The whole development of most sport-games, and certainly that of football, centred to a very large extent on the solution of this problem: how was it possible to maintain within the set game-pattern a high level of group tension and the group dynamics resulting from it, while at the same time keeping recurrent physical injury to the players at the lowest possible level. The question was and still is, in other words, how to ‘steer the ship’, as it were, between the Scylla of disorderliness and the Charybdis of boredom. People who have acted as coaches or managers in the game may appreciate that this is a problem of great practical significance. A good number of people in that position are used to thinking in terms of configurations as a matter of course if they plan ahead; for that is the most realistic way of envisaging a game and most appropriate for the working out of strategies. Thus, in preparing his team for a game, a manager may say that the opponents are likely to use a ‘4—2—4 system’, that their own task is to prevent the opponents from dominating the mid-field play; in order to achieve this, he may assign to two of his players the task of ‘blotting out’ the opponents’ ‘link’ men, so that the rest can concentrate on the task of attack. However, although trained by his immediate experience to envisage the game as a fluctuating configuration of players, it is neither his aim nor his task to stand back and
to reflect on the characteristics and regularities of these configurations as such. The Committee of the Football Association who decided in 1925 on the change in the offside rule were probably aware that under the old rules the ‘tone’ of the game had become too low, as people on other occasions noticed that the game had begun to stray from the middle course between disorderliness and dullness. But up to now the concepts available for dealing with such problems are not very articulate. In order to see their wider significance—their significance for a small group theory or for a sociological game theory in general—it is necessary to work out comparatively new concepts as a framework for observation and to change the meaning of some of those which already exist.

Let us start with the concept of configuration. It has already been said that a game is the changing configuration of the players on the field. This means that the configuration is not only an aspect of the players. It is not as one sometimes seems to believe if one uses related expressions such as ‘social pattern’, ‘social group’, or ‘society’, something abstracted from individual people. Configurations are formed by individuals, as it were ‘body and soul’. If one watches the players standing and moving on the field in constant interdependence, one can actually see them forming a continuously changing configuration. If groups or societies are large, one usually cannot see the configurations their individual members form with one another. Nevertheless, in these cases, too, people form configurations with each other—a city, a church, a political party, a state—which are no less real than the one formed by players on a football field, even though one cannot take them in at a glance.

To envisage groupings of people as configurations in this sense, with their dynamics, their problems of tension and of tension control and many others, even though one cannot see them here and now, requires a specific training of the imagination. This is one of the tasks of configurational sociology, of which the present paper is an example. At present, a good deal of uncertainty still exists with regard to the nature of that phenomenon to which one refers as ‘society’. Sociological theories often appear to start from the assumption that ‘groups’ or ‘societies’, and ‘social phenomena’ in general, are something abstracted from individual people, or at least that they are not quite as ‘real’ as individuals, whatever that may mean. The game of football—as a small-scale model—can help to correct this view. It shows that configurations of individuals are neither more nor less real than the individuals who form them. Configurational sociology is based on observations such as this. In contrast to sociological theories which treat societies as if they were mere names, a ‘flatum vocis’, and ‘ideal type’, a sociologist’s construction, and which are in that sense representative of sociological nominalism, it represents a sociological realism. Individuals always
come in configurations and configurations are always formed by individuals.

If one watches a game of football one can understand that it is the fluctuating configuration of the players itself on which, at a given moment, the decisions and moves of individual players depend. In that respect concepts such as ‘interaction’ and its relatives are apt to mislead. They appear to suggest that individuals without configurations form configurations with each other \textit{a posteriori}. They make it difficult to come to grips with the type of tensions one encounters in the study of football. These tensions are different in character from those which may arise when two formerly independent individuals, ‘ego’ and ‘alter’, begin to interact. As has already been said, it is the configuration of players itself which embodies a tension of a specific type—a controlled tension. One can neither understand nor explain its character from the ‘interaction’ of individual players.

In societies such as ours, it is one of the characteristics of a game that the tension inherent in the configuration of players is neither too high nor too low: the game must last for a while, but must finally be resolved in the victory of one side or the other. There can be ‘drawn’ games, but if they occur too often, one would suspect that something in the construction of the game was faulty.

Thus, in present-day industrial societies, a game is a group configuration of a very specific type. At its heart is the controlled tension between two sub-groups holding each other in balance. This is a phenomenon one can observe in many other fields. It appears to deserve a special name. We have called it a ‘tension-balance’. Just as the mobility of a human limb is dependent on the contained tension between two antagonistic muscle groups in balance, so the game process depends on a tension between two at the same time antagonistic and interdependent sets of players keeping each other in a fluctuating equilibrium.\textsuperscript{10}

The mechanics of configurations with a tension-balance at their centre are far from simple. Two examples may be enough to illustrate them: the flexible tension-balance in a game process cannot be produced and maintained at just the right level if one side is very much stronger than the other. If that is the case, the stronger side will probably score more frequently, the game tension—the ‘tone’ of the game—will be relatively low, and the game itself will be slow and lifeless. But it would be a mistake to think that in studying the group dynamics of a game one is mainly concerned with questions arising from the qualities of individual teams or of individual players. What we have primarily studied is the development and the structure of the game-pattern as such. This pattern has at a given time a specific form maintained by controls at various levels. It is controlled by football organizations, by state and local authorities, by the spectators, by the teams mutually, by the players individually. One need not enumerate them all or analyse their inter-
play in this context. In theoretical discourse, one is apt to consider the controls preserving a particular configuration, and above all the tension balance of a configuration, in terms of rules or norms only. But, as in other cases, rules and especially formal rules are only one of the ‘instruments’ of control responsible for the relative stability of groups-in-controlled-tension. And, whatever they are, group rules or group norms, here as elsewhere, are no absolutes.

Rules or norms as devices for the control of tensions do not float outside and above social processes as is sometimes suggested in present discussions. The group dynamics which rules help to maintain may, on their part, determine whether rules persist or change. The development of football regulations shows very strikingly how changes of rules can depend on the overall development of that which they rule. The dynamics of such configurations have what one might call a ‘logic’ of their own. Thus, in football the tension level may flag, not simply because of the distinguishing characteristics of individual playing groups or of their individual members, but because of set characteristics of the configuration which they form with one another. This is a phenomenon which one encounters again and again if one surveys the development of a game. In 1925, for example, the ‘offside’ rule in soccer was changed. Until then, the rule was this: a player could only legitimately receive a ball passed forward to him by another member of his side, if at least three members of the opposing team stood between him and their goal. If less than three were so positioned, he was ruled ‘offside’, and a ‘free kick’ was awarded to the opponents. In 1925, the number was reduced to two. The elasticity of the older rule, skilfully exploited, had led to a stage where stalemates had become increasingly frequent. What had happened was that the balance had moved too far in favour of the defence. Games tended to drag on without decision or scores were low. The reason was not any particular quality of individual players: the configuration of players as stabilized by a variety of controls, among which the formal rules held a key position, had itself proved deficient. Hence, the attempt was made, by means of a change of rules, to establish a more fluid configuration of the players which could restore the balance between attack and defence.

This is one example of a number of polarities which in football, and probably also in all other sport-games, are built into the established configuration of the game process. Such polarities operate in close connection with each other. In fact, a complex of interdependent polarities built into the game pattern provides the main motive force for the group dynamics of a football game. In one way or another they all contribute towards maintaining the ‘tone’, the tension-balance of the game. Here is a list of some of them:

1. the overall polarity between the two opposing teams
2. the polarity between attack and defence
3 the polarity between co-operation and tension of the two teams
4 the polarity between co-operation and competition within each team.

Polarity, 4, can express itself in a variety of ways. One of them is that between individual team members and the team as a whole, shown in the following examples:

(a) In the 1860's and 70's individual dribbling was the centrepiece of soccer. The fluctuating tension-balance between team interests and individual interests was geared in favour of the latter. This corresponded to the social characteristics of the game during that period. It was then a game primarily played by public school old-boys and by other middle- and upper-class people for their own enjoyment. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, this technique gave way to a different manner of playing. Team co-operation became accentuated at the expense of opportunities for the individual to shine competitively within the team. Thus, the balance between individual and team interests changed. Individual dribbling receded and passing the ball from one member of a team to another came to the fore. It is possible to analyse the reasons for this change with considerable stringency. An increase in the number of teams, the establishment of floral competitions, increased competitive rivalry among teams, and the beginning of playing for a paying public were among them.

(b) Even after the balance between the team members' consideration for the team's interests and that for their individual interests had moved strongly in favour of the former, the polarity continued to play its part. Every game pattern leaves to some players considerable scope for decisions. In fact, without the capacity to take decisions quickly an individual cannot be a good player. But again and again, in taking his decisions, the individual player must decide between the need for co-operating with other members for the team's sake and that for contributing to his personal reputation and advancement. The present conceptualization in cases such as this is dominated by absolute alternatives such as 'egoism' and 'altruism'. As instruments of realistic sociological analysis they have little to recommend them. As one can see, thinking in terms of balances and polarities makes it easier to come to grips with what one actually observes.

Other polarities are of a slightly different type. These are a few examples:

5 the polarity between the external controls of players on a variety of levels (by managers, captains, team-mates, referees, linesmen, spectators, etc.), and the flexible control which the individual player exercises upon himself
6 the polarity between affectionate identification and hostile rivalry with the opponents
7 the polarity between the enjoyment of aggression by the individual players and the curb imposed upon such enjoyment by the game pattern
8 the polarity between elasticity and fixity of rules.

These are some aspects of the theoretical model, and some examples of the type of concepts which emerge from the study of game configurations. They may help to bring into focus a few of the distinguishing characteristics of this type of group. Such groups differ from the types of groups usually employed as empirical evidence for small group studies not only because they are groups-in-controlled-tensions, but also because they are more highly structured and organized. Theories derived from studies of relatively loosely structured, ad hoc groups specially formed for the purpose of studying groups are frequently marred by a confusion between properties of groups which are mainly due to those of their individual members and properties inherent in the configuration of people itself. In the case of more highly structured and organized groups it is easier to determine the dynamics inherent in the configuration as such and to distinguish it from variations due to differences on the individual level. It is easier, for instance, in the case of football to distinguish the dynamics inherent in the game configuration as such from variations due to the characteristics of different nations, of different teams, or of different players.

Ad hoc groups have little autonomy in relation to the society where they are formed and this lack of autonomy can impair the validity of the results derived from studies of such groups. Thus, small groups formed in the United States with the aim of studying problems of leadership generally, may in fact provide information only about aspects of leadership in the United States. It is an open question how far similar experiments undertaken, say in Russia or in Ghana, would produce similar results.

Games such as football are played everywhere in the same manner and the basic configurational dynamics are everywhere the same. One can study them as such and one can study at the same time the variations which arise from the playing of different nationalities, of different teams, of different individuals.

Like ad hoc groups, sport groups have definite limitations as evidence for the study of small group problems or of problems of group dynamics in general. Among them are the limitations due to the fact that games are largely ends in themselves. Their purpose, if they have a purpose, is to give people pleasure. In that respect, they differ greatly from those groupings of men which are usually regarded as the centrepieces of social life and which hold a correspondingly central position in sociology from groupings such as factories with the purpose of producing goods, bureaucracies with that of administering states or other enterprises, and from other, equally useful configurations of men which are not normally
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regarded as ends in themselves or supposed to give people pleasure. It agrees with this scheme of values that sociologists often try to define organizations and social units in general, in the first place, by means of their goals.

But if it is a limitation of the study of sport-games—compared with that of social units concerned with the serious business of life—that they have no purpose except perhaps that of providing enjoyment, and are often pursued as ends in themselves, it is also an advantage. It may serve as a corrective to the teleological fallacy still fairly widespread in sociological thinking. In a simplified manner, this can be described as a confusion between the individual level and the group level. With regard to games of football this distinction is fairly clear. Individual players and teams have aims, scoring goals is one of them. The enjoyment of playing, the excitement of spectators, the hope of rewards may be others. But the concatenation of purposeful actions results in a configurational dynamics—in a game—which is purposeless. One can determine it as such and to some extent that has been done here. But this could not have been done if one had attributed the aims of individual players to the changing configuration which the players form with each other.

How far this is true of other configurations of men need not be discussed here. But one can say that even state organizations, churches, factories, and other configurations of the more serious kind, whatever the aims of the people who form them, are at the same time ends in themselves with dynamics of their own. What, after all, are the purposes of nations? It is not entirely frivolous to say that even they resemble a game played by people with each other for its own sake. To neglect this aspect by focusing attention in the first place on their purposes, means overlooking the fact that, as in football, it is the changing configuration of people itself on which at any given time the decisions, the purposes, and the moves of individuals depend. This is particularly so in the case of tensions and conflicts. They are often explained only in terms of the intentions and aims of one side or the other. Sociologists would perhaps be better able to contribute to an understanding of those tensions and conflicts which have so far proved uncontrollable if they would investigate them as aspects of the purposeless dynamics of groups.
Notes

1. We are referring here to small group theory in the sense in which this term is currently used in sociology. We are not referring to other theories of small groups such as e.g. those concerned with problems of group therapy, although in those cases, too, the configurational approach may be of help.


5. It has been dealt with extensively in N. Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, Basle, 1939, 2 vols.


9. In order to avoid misunderstanding one has to add that the term ‘sociological realism’ as used here does not mean what it means if it is applied to Durkheim’s theory. Durkheim could not escape from a position where social phenomena appeared as something abstracted and apart from individuals. These abstractions he sometimes reified: he never got beyond a stage where ‘society’ and ‘individuals’ appear as separate entities which he tried to bring together again in the end by an almost mystical hypothesis. This criticism is perfectly compatible with the recognition of the intellectual calibre of his work and the scientific advances due to him.

10. There is one characteristic difference between the tension-balance of antagonistic muscles and that of antagonistic players in a game. In the case of muscles, one side relaxes when the other is tensed. In the case of players, the specific character of the tension-balance is due to the fact that both sides are ‘tensed’.