INTRODUCTION

A number of possibilities suggest themselves as far as the format and contents of this concluding chapter are concerned. I could, for example, indicate the areas of criticism of the figurational position put forward in this volume that I agree with and then attempt a point-by-point rebuttal of those with which I disagree. Alternatively – in line with what a number of scholars erroneously believe to be one of hallmarks of the figurational or ‘process-sociological’ approach – I could blithely ignore what others have written and simply discuss some of my own ideas. However, neither of these possibilities strikes me as a particularly good idea. Let me attempt to spell out why.

Like sociology generally at the moment, the sociology of sport is multi-paradigmatic. Inherent in such a situation – dare I call it a ‘figuration’? – is the near-certainty that adherents to different ‘schools’ will misconstrue and perhaps even parody the work of others. It is also a near-certainty in a multi-paradigmatic subject that the protagonists of particular positions will tend to see their own work as misunderstood and caricatured by ‘outsiders’.

It has certainly been the case that figurational sociologists have been accused in recent years of caricaturing others’ work. However, we are equally adamant that our own work has been frequently misconstrued. As I hope the open-minded reader will come to see, some of the criticisms advanced in the present volume fall into that category. Indeed, outside the sociology of sport, the figurational position continues not only to be caricatured but also widely ignored. Accordingly, besides responding to what I take to be some of the principal criticisms so far advanced, whether here or elsewhere, I shall take this opportunity to set forth some of the things that figurational sociologists actually say. I shall also spell out what we regard as the main
strengths and weaknesses of such other positions as Marxism and ‘structuration theory’, and specify some of the ways in which we have attempted to incorporate the strengths and overcome the weaknesses of such other approaches. It ought not to be necessary to add in this connection that, in making this last point, I am not claiming that we have necessarily been successful in these attempts or that figurational sociology is without its own weaknesses and lacunae.

I shall start, however, with some historical/autobiographical reminiscences concerning the development of the figurational sociology of sport. I shall start in this way because, while writers such as Home and Jary (1987) praise Norbert Elias and myself for having been among the first to see the relevance of sociological studies of sport and leisure, they arguably fail to appreciate sufficiently some of the difficulties we had to contend with. In particular, they seem not to take due cognizance of what it was like to embark on sociological studies in this area, particularly ‘developmental’ or ‘process-sociological’ studies, in the environment of British sociology in the 1950s and 1960s, the period when the groundwork for most of the research we have carried out in these areas was laid down.6

SOME HISTORICAL/AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REMINISCENCES

In Aachen, West Germany, in 1977 on the occasion of his 80th birthday, Norbert Elias was presented with a Festschrift entitled, Human Figurations (Gleichmann et al., 1977). He started his acceptance speech by recounting a nightmare he had recurrently experienced in the 1950s and 1960s. It involved him dreaming that he was shouting into a telephone repeatedly: ‘Can you hear me?’, ‘Is anybody there?’ He interpreted the nightmare as meaning that he felt he had something to say to the sociological community but that, in those days, few were listening. As the 1960s drew to a close, however, more and more people began to listen and the nightmare ceased. The result is that when he died in August 1990 at the age of 93, Elias had come to be a widely respected, if still in some ways controversial, figure in the sociological world. Nevertheless, recognition of his work remains patchy and his influence has penetrated less widely and deeply into the world of Anglo-American sociology than into those of such continental countries as The Netherlands, Germany, France and Italy. There is, however, one exception to this pattern. It involves not a national sociological community but a particular sub-discipline. I am referring, of course, to the sociology of sport. In this field Elias is a well-known name, even in Britain and America, so