

Power Changes and Self-Respect: A Comparison of Two Cases of Established-Outsider Relations

Bram van Stolk and Cas Wouters

This article is based on two studies of outsiders in an emancipation process.¹⁾ The first one deals with homosexuals (van Stolk and de Regt, 1979), and the second with women (van Stolk and Wouters, 1983); both studies were carried out in a social service organization. Most of the homosexuals sought counselling because of difficulties in accepting themselves; they suffered from a lack of self-respect. The women, predominantly working-class, had been taken into a crisis centre after having run away from their partners. In doing so most of them had given way to pressure due to an increase in self-respect; in effect they could no longer tolerate the way they had been treated. The problems of both the homosexuals and the runaway women are examined in the context of a decreasing inequality of power in the relations between homosexuals and heterosexuals, and between men and women respectively. With the help of Norbert Elias's established-outsider theory, the *relation* between women and men is compared to that between homosexuals and heterosexuals. The main focus is on the connection between changes in their mutual balance of power, in the respect shown them socially and in their self-respect. The comparison is preceded by a short survey of the main conclusions of the two empirical studies.

Homosexuals

In the course of life people become attached to certain future expectations. From early childhood they develop, partly unawares, ideas and ideals about their future position with regard to others, and the respect it will bring. Later these ideas become elaborated and modelled according to the new demands that others make, or appear to be making of them. The struggle to realize these cherished hopes gives meaning to life. Those who fail inevitably become trapped between reality and the ideals they have set themselves. They grow dissatisfied with themselves; in their own eyes they are no longer respected by others, and consequently they lose self-respect.

The ideal self-image always embraces elementary images of 'real men' and 'real women'. Whatever the appearance of these real men and women, they are never homosexual! Children have no opportunity to become acquainted with images of a future life as a

homosexual; they are not brought up to be homosexual. Sooner or later they will discover that the outlook for homosexuals is generally considered gloomy: homosexuals will inevitably become lonely, rejected, pathetic people. During puberty and adolescence many homosexuals continue to fantasize about a heterosexual future, because they lack a suitable, socially acceptable future perspective. In their images of the future they achieve the ideals they have set themselves, and fulfil the expectations others seem to have of them. However, the resultant satisfaction is only fleeting, being constantly undermined by the fear that the gap between their fantasies and reality will prove impossible to bridge.

Fantasies and day-dreams can help to prepare for the future provided they are not systematically permeated by illusion. Therefore such fantasies are an unsatisfactory means of orientation for homosexuals. They may influence them to make the wrong decision—for instance to get married.

Many are unable to see themselves as homosexuals because the threatened loss of respect and self-respect, of a valued outlook, of their basic orientation to life, seems to be insurmountable. The tension between the reality of homosexual wishes and the ideal self-image leads eventually – temporarily or lastingly – to compromise solutions in both self-esteem and everyday life. Here there are many possibilities: for a great many homosexuals the tension between their ideal self-image and the reality of their sexual preference is the core of their problems in accepting themselves.

During the last twenty years the opportunities to get out of this impasse have definitely increased in the Netherlands, as well as in some other countries. In the meantime many have managed to overcome it by making their way into the liberation movement, to forms of therapy orientated towards self-acceptance, and to heterosexuals who accept them for what they are. However, it goes without saying that the old problems crop up from time to time and never completely disappear.

Women

Considering the violence, intimidation and other forms of humiliation the women described to us, the incentive to run away was usually quite easy to appreciate. It was obviously a liberating step. No matter how diverse their life histories, all shared this common denominator.

A woman of about fifty told us that you used to be thought lucky if the man you married turned out to be a good one. If he was a bad man it was just your bad luck. The woman used the term 'bad luck' (Turner, 1969: 400ff.) to indicate her previous attitude to her

husband. In the crisis department of the women's home her ideas changed: what she had previously accepted as bad luck, she now regarded a wrong against herself which she resisted. She was not the only one – all the women we spoke to felt they had been unjustly treated. The bad-luck phase, the period of resignation to an unpleasant fate, was most noticeable in the life-histories of older women.

More and more women came to realize that there was room for improvement, that something could and should be done about their situation. They felt their interests would be damaged more if they stayed at home than if they left. All the same, most of them were still ambivalent, poised between resignation and resistance, between submission and emancipation. Although the feeling that they had been wronged was uppermost, the former idea of bad luck had not gone for good. One lifetime is usually too short for that anyway.

The fact that many of these women had already left home more than once shows how ambivalent they were about their own emancipation. Some had become caught up in their ambivalent feelings. The degree to which this happened depended largely on how much a woman still took her husband's part with her conscience a derivative of his. *His* view remained embedded in her personality in a way typical of outsiders in their relations with the established. She takes more notice of him than he of her, she is more sensitive to his whims than he to hers. Accordingly, most of the women could describe their husband's character in detail, while the men could not describe their wife's. They got no further than generalizations, clichés applicable to many women. The self-esteem of these men depended primarily on what other *men* thought of them, in other words on their position in the order of precedence within the group of the established.

When the women began to realize that they were being treated unfairly their first, obvious request was often to 'talk about it'. Many men found this utterly unreasonable, thinking the women were just being a nuisance, and their reactions to the first signs of rebellious behaviour were typical of the established: punishment, suppression, punitive shows of force to show who is boss. In this they resemble the Europeans who reacted to the budding nationalistic aspirations of intellectual natives in their colonies with repressive measures, when all the natives wanted to do at first was to discuss their grievances. Some of these Europeans are still alive, but few will want to identify with them. Today the conscience of most Europeans, in keeping with the altered balance of power, sides with the early nationalists.

A similar gradual change in conscience formation also occurred in men and women as the balance of power between the sexes changed. At the start of each new round in the power

struggle the outsiders bring up certain issues which the established refuse to consider, are unwilling to negotiate (de Swaan, 1981). Consequently, the women were forced to identify more with their men. Therefore they were better at understanding their men than vice versa. (We think this is the basis for what is known as female intuition.) This applies not only to relations between women and men, but seems to be a general characteristic of outsider-established relationships. For instance, a homosexual will seldom be heard to say in earnest, 'I just don't understand those heterosexuals', while the opposite is often heard without even being considered offensive.

Comparisons and Theoretical Remarks

Elias's established-outsider theory is overshadowed by his theory of the civilizing process. Its comprehensiveness has yet to be appreciated by a wider sociological public. We believe that the established-outsider and the civilizing process theories overlap and complement each other. For instance, they both clarify the connections between developments in power relations and developments in personality structure. The book *The Established and the Outsiders* (Elias and Scotson, 1965) is about the figuration formed by people from two British working-class neighbourhoods. It shows how the unequal power relations that developed between the neighbourhoods – between the established inhabitants and the newcomers – was reflected in the personality of the inhabitants. The unequal balance of power was recognizable by the feeling of superiority and gratifying self-esteem felt by the established, and the outsiders' feeling of inferiority. The book's main theme is the connection between power relations, respect for others (status or rank), and self-respect. It explores this Connection more explicitly than *The Civilizing Process* (Elias, 1978, 1982), using concepts like group fantasy, group charisma, group identity, we-image and we-ideal.

While *The Established and the Outsiders* focuses on developments in the balance of power between the old inhabitants and the newcomers, thereby explaining various individual characteristics and personal problems, in our investigations the focus is more directly on the personal problems of the people involved. Another difference from the Elias study is that the power relations in the complex figurations we examined were more dynamic, both our studies being concerned with outsiders in the process of becoming emancipated.²⁾ This again revealed the extent to which developments in power relations and social stratification penetrate the personality and create personal problems.

Viewed in this light the established-outsider theory may function as a complement and corrective to Freudian thought (see Elias's new theoretical essay to the Dutch translation:

Elias and Scotson, 1965: 20), where personal problems are mainly interpreted as problems resulting from the power relations and tensions in the family of origin. However, many of the problems which most psychotherapists tend to connect with individual personal history, like the abovementioned feeling of inferiority, cannot be satisfactorily explained this way. In our experience the sense of inferiority felt by homosexuals and women is to be understood primarily in the context of fluctuating power relations and tensions in figurations encompassing the families of origin, going way beyond them in complexity and scope. Their group's limited social esteem hampered the development of a gratifying self-esteem. The respect a person receives, depending on his rank in the social hierarchy, is internalized and reflected in his sense of self-respect. The social dividing lines which are made, and the resulting order of precedence form the almost self-evident standards by which people judge themselves and others, and to which they adjust their ideal self-image and we-image. This order of precedence in turn reflects the balance of power. When that changes the order of precedence changes accordingly – sometimes immediately, sometimes belatedly – and that also changes ways of winning the respect of others and self-respect. The problems of self-respect that we encountered in women and homosexuals appear to change with changes in the social balance of power generally, and in the power-balances between men and women, and homosexuals and heterosexuals respectively, in particular. The same applies to other problems of self-respect, like those which growing old may bring. Many ageing people lose their social functions and feel that life is passing them by. As a group, the old have lost their established position, which affects their self-respect. In the same way, changes in the international balance of power – being conquered in war, or losing a colonial empire – can affect the self-respect of an entire nation.

Comparing the relations between homosexuals and women and the established alerted us to three differences which we consider to be of theoretical importance. They may be formulated as three interrelated questions, which may prove relevant to other studies of established-outsider figurations:

- How do the outsiders acquire a group identity?
- How and to what extent do the two groups of outsiders depend on the respective established groups?
- How and in what direction does the mutual balance of power develop?

In answering the last question we shall explore the connection between behavioural codes and ideals, and phases in the development of established-outsider relations.

The use of comparison in the first question points to an important difference in the way homosexuals and women acquire their group identity: women are brought up as women, homosexuals as heterosexuals. In contrast with people in certain other groups of outsiders, homosexuals do not grow up among like-minded companions. As homosexuals are not born to homosexual couples they eventually have to discard their early ideals – based on their parents' example. Moreover, as long as the balance of power between homosexuals and heterosexuals remains so unequal they will also be compelled to exchange the early identity passed on to them for an inferior one. In this respect, outsiders from poor countries who wish to remain in western industrial societies find themselves in a similar plight. They too have to adjust to an inferior (group) identity, that of the immigrant worker. These problems are unknown to (heterosexual) women.

The second question is how and to what extent the two groups of outsiders depend on their respective established groups. Men and women need each other for sexual satisfaction and depend on each other to have children. Moreover, in societies like ours family life places heavy emotional demands on its members, so that men and women also depend on each other in this respect, much more than heterosexuals can ever depend on homosexuals. In general the inequalities of power between men and women can never be as great as those between heterosexuals and homosexuals: the latter may be the object of an extermination campaign, but not women. In the same way the inequalities between employers and employees can never be as big as proved possible between Jews and non-Jews. The possibility of extermination, and the persecution of groups of outsiders, are recorded in their collective memory, leaving a mark on the personality of individual outsiders. Therefore the emphasis with which the gay liberation movement states that AIDS is not a homosexual disease may be viewed partly as an expression of the fear of stigmatization, internment or worse. Homosexuals as a group have no particular social task, and therefore have no social power source at their disposal. They can and do organize themselves but, unlike employees, have no obvious means of exerting pressure. Women could use the household tasks they usually perform as a means of applying pressure. Nothing has come of it, however; apparently their feeling of solidarity as a group is too weak. When a group of outsiders *does* have a particular social function, this still is not a sufficient condition for it being used as a source of power. Both the organized women and the organized homosexuals have used moral indignation as the prime weapon in their struggle. The successful use of moral arguments as the main source of power seems to us to be a characteristic of the kind of society in which we live, that is to say a society with a relatively

tightly-knit network of interdependencies, democratized power centres and, related to this, a relatively strong mutual identification and high level of *mutual expected self-restraint*.³⁾

Our last question is about the course of development of the relations between both groups of outsiders and their related established groups. As already mentioned, we are concerned with two groups of outsiders whose power has been increasing. During the last half of the sixties, both groups succeeded in exerting some form of organized pressure on the established. To do this they first had to overcome some of their mutual distrust and ambivalent feelings about themselves, their companions and the established.

The liberation process in which women and homosexuals rid themselves of their ambivalent feelings about themselves and their group continues haltingly. Such processes usually cover several generations. The conscience of many women and homosexuals is still strongly in sympathy with the relevant established group. It is only with great difficulty that they are able to detach themselves from the old pattern, where their respect of others and self-respect depend largely on their ability to fulfil the demands of the established.

In certain Islamic areas women are proud of being circumcised, which is very painful and, to us, humiliating; their pride shows how much the self-respect of outsiders may depend on the respect shown them by the established. In those areas practically all men and women agree that no girl is a woman until she has been circumcised. This is (still) compensated by the existence in those areas of a (still) unequivocal positive ideal image. When the women go by that ideal, they are rewarded with physical and material protection, respect and therefore self-respect. It is a behavioural ideal, internalized by men and women from an early age as *one* pattern of mutual dependence; it is a *figuration ideal* and, moreover, a *figuration ideal of harmonious inequality* (van Stolk and Wouters, 1983; Wouters, 1986).

The figuration ideal of harmonious inequality can probably only develop when the established and the outsiders are highly dependent on each other, that is, when the established also have strong ties with the outsiders. For instance, such an ideal has never developed in relations between homosexuals and heterosexuals, or between Jews and non-Jews.

Apart from a high degree of mutual dependence, direct contact also seems to stimulate the development of a figuration ideal of harmonious inequality, as was clearly the case in the relations between aristocratic or wealthy bourgeois families and their servants. Like couples, or parents and children, these families and their servants had extensive direct contact with a high degree of mutual dependence, governed by similar figuration ideals about social contact in harmonious inequality. This ideal is clearly expressed in the work of Charles Dickens. George Orwell said of the relation between master and servant in Dickens:

But what is curious, in a nineteenth-century radical, is that when he wants to draw a sympathetic picture of a servant, he creates what is recognizably a feudal type.... they identify themselves with their master's families and are at once doggishly faithful and completely familiar.... Dickens's views on the servant question do not get much beyond wishing that master and servant would love one another.... Such loyalty, of course, is natural, human and likeable, but so was feudalism. (Orwell, 1965: 114-115)

When studying established-outsider figurations, it is relevant to ask to what extent they are characterized by an ideal of harmonious inequality. In some established-outsider relations, like those between heterosexuals and homosexuals, such a figuration ideal has never existed. In relations where such an ideal has developed, its influence fluctuates according to certain phases in the struggle for power. In a *phase of consolidation and resignation* the figuration ideal of harmonious inequality goes largely unchallenged, while in a *phase of emancipation and resistance* it is attacked, becoming subject to stress from the increasingly important ideal of more equal social contact (van Stolk and Wouters, 1983; Wouters, 1986).

After the first wave in the feminist movement, the development in the balance of power between the sexes went into a phase of consolidation and resignation, and the figuration ideal of harmonious inequality flourished. In most western countries during that period, from the late twenties to well into the sixties, the continued inequality of their power relations was unmistakable, though less unequal than it was, and certainly less so than in the Islamic areas mentioned above. However, the suppression was less noticeable because a new generation of women had already expanded to the broader limits allowed them, and generally stayed within them. Various religious, biological and psychological arguments were used to legitimate the subordination of women. For example, before the last war the female author of Holland's best-known book on etiquette wrote, 'Go in search of yourself! Do not be afraid of what you will eventually discover, for in the shining core of your being is the urge inherent in all women to serve lovingly.' If women will only adjust their Ego-ideal to the (again/still) unequivocal positive figuration ideal of harmonious inequality, the recommended submissiveness will not go unrewarded: 'Even if you are unaware of it at present, this beautiful urge also lives within you, and it enables you to transform a grey boring life into a shining fairy tale' (Groskamp ten Have, 1939: 13). This is an obvious example of how women themselves also emphasized their own subordination, their attitude towards male superiority being one of resigned forgiveness. This kind of book may be regarded as a guide to social contact in harmonious inequality, in a submissiveness rewarded by protection and respect. In the sixties the balance of power changed and a liberation movement flourished, hence the

period of consolidation and resignation became one of emancipation and resistance. The guides to social contact in harmonious inequality then aroused embarrassment and moral indignation. They soon went out of print. At the same time the volume of literature on self-realization and emancipation increased, indicating new ways of gaining respect and thus self-respect (van Stolk and Wouters, 1983; Wouters, 1986).

One can invariably distinguish three categories within groups of outsiders who are becoming liberated. First, there are the 'radicals' who consciously develop their own we-ideal and are proud of it. Then there are the 'moderates' who want the old stigma to be recognized as inapplicable, and thus no longer a criterion of social inferiority. Finally there are 'stragglers' who are still relatively more orientated toward the old relation patterns and feel pressured by the liberation movement (van Stolk and de Regt, 1979). Despite disagreement among the outsiders themselves about a worthwhile outlook and the eventual development of their own we-ideal, both homosexuals and women have been turning less and less towards the established and more and more towards each other in the course of their struggle for emancipation. Their group cohesion has developed enough to enable them to succeed in changing their image in the eyes of the established.

Accordingly, both the outsiders and the established change their ideals about their mutual contact, their figuration ideals. Social developments thus imply personal developments, as well as personal problems. In periods of emancipation and resistance improvements are expected almost as a matter of course, and when they do not go far enough, or fail to materialize, it is soon felt to be unjust and therefore morally objectionable. There is a good deal of moralizing: those on the wrong side of the social dividing-lines are not just unlucky, they have been wronged. The feeling of social and biographical continuity and the relative peace of mind it brings with it vanish. Those concerned are more easily confused by setbacks. This applies both to the established and the outsiders, for on both sides of every crumbling social dividing line there will always be people who are slow to control their fears of each other and for themselves, people acutely frightened by their social rise or fall. So when the feeling of social and biographical continuity is attacked, specific problems of respect and self-respect arise on both sides of the social dividing-lines.

The latest phase of consolidation and resignation (see van Stolk and Wouters, 1983; Wouters, 1986), which started in the late seventies, has brought with it new problems of respect and self-respect. The established-outsider theory could provide a promising framework to record and interpret it. A comparison of the similarities and differences in the nature of self-respect problems during both phases as expressed by people in the various

groups and sub-groups of established and outsiders, would be not only of interest from a social-scientific viewpoint, but could also be important to the caring professions.

Notes

1. This article was translated by Anna van Blaaderen. An earlier version of this article appeared in *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, 7(3) 1980.
2. It was the homosexuals and women who managed to get studies of their groups introduced to the universities.
3. This is J. Goudsblom's term, first introduced into English by Cas Wouters (1986) in 'Formalization and Informalization: Changing Tension Balances in Civilizing Processes'.

References

- Elias, Norbert (1978) *The Civilizing Process*, Vol. 1: *The History of Manners*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert (1982) *The Civilizing Process*, Vol. 2: *State Formation and Civilization*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert and Scotson, John (1965) *The Established and the Outsiders*. London: Cass.
- Elias, Norbert and Scotson, John (1976) *De Gevestigden en de Buitenstaanders*. Utrecht/Antwerp.
- Groskamp ten Have, Amy (1939) *Onder vier Ogen*. Amsterdam.
- Orwell, George (1965) 'Charles Dickens' in *The Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- van Stolk, Bram and de Regt, José (1979) 'Zelfaanvaarding van homoseksuelen', *Maandblad Geestelijke Volksgezondheid*, 1.
- van Stolk, Bram and Wouters, Cas (1983) *Vrouwen in Tweestrijd*. Deventer.
- de Swaan, A. (1981) 'The Politics of Agoraphobia', *Theory and Society*, 10(3): 359-386.
- Turner, R.H. (1969) 'The Theme of Contemporary Social Movements', *British Journal of Sociology*.
- Wouters, Cas (1986) 'Formalization and Informalization: Changing Tension Balances in Civilizing Processes', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 3(2): 1-18.