

# ***Club rivalries and local communities – derbies and the interplay of figurations***

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## **Abstract**

Derbies are one of the most popular events in football from grass roots to elite professional football. On a professional elite level sold-out stadia and high audience rates generally guarantee high profits in the commercialised business world of football. From that perspective it is not surprising that derbies are on the focus of attention not at least in the media. In line with the framing-research especially the media can be determined as a key part in popularising derby-events due to building special derby-frames<sup>1</sup>. That is true not only for the mass media but also for the local press, which reports from local derbies at lower football levels. But it is insufficient and restricted to focus only on the media influence. Media frames operate only if they fit with recipients frames. Moreover, the high emotional involvement, extreme importance of derby victims and not least the greater problem of violence after derbies remain unstudied. Thereby, seeking for an explanation of the huge popularity of derbies requires a historical and cultural approach with a view to club rivalries and local communities.

The purpose of this study is to describe and examine the phenomenon of derbies from that historical and cultural perspective. Focusing on the key aspects of derbies - club rivalry in regional proximity, long-term history as inherent part of the collective memory of fan groups, strong identity with the local community and also strong boundaries to the rival (especially apparent in insulting chants) - it is suggested to explain the phenomenon of derbies with the model of figuration proposed by Norbert Elias. Elias' model of figuration is a useful analytic tool to explain power inequalities between superficial identical groups. An essential issue is that the major group is in a position to disgrace the inferior group mainly resulting from the feeling of superiority. According to this, processes of strengthen the group identity can be analysed due to figuration's essential element of functional interdependence. Another powerful tool of the model of figuration is the inherent perspective of changes in time.

In adopting the model of figuration to the derby-phenomenon it can be argued, that victims of the supported football club, seen as a representative of the local community, create that feeling of superiority and give reason for disgracing the rival community, in particular when the communities are structurally indistinguishable. As the concept of figuration is constructed with a view to practical behaviour, in football such practical behaviours resulting from demonstrating the feeling of superiority can be localised at working places or different recreational settings but primarily at the stadia. In combination with the very high level of emotional involvement in the context of derbies, which is attributed mainly to the historically developed and maintained local identity, the model of figuration provides an explanation not only for the huge popu-

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<sup>1</sup> From a critical perspective, the inflating use of derby-frames can be observed widely- e.g. the so-called north-south-derby between *Bayern München* and *Hamburger SV*. Another application of the derby-frame can also be discovered on a national elite level- e.g. the national derbies England versus Scotland or Germany versus Netherlands/Austria.

larity but also for the greater problem of violence after derbies. This applies in particular if the altered power balance is collectively not accepted on the part of the inferior group.

In conclusion, the model of figuration can help to explain the huge popularity and violence-problematic of derbies in an analytical profound way. Methodologically speaking it is recommended to concentrate on the smallest entity as an 'empirical paradigm': the rivalry of football clubs of villages or urban districts - or in other words as the conference-title suggests on the grassroots of football. This methodological strategy is also taken from Elias' model of figuration.