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Becoming and staying talented: A figurational analysis of organization, power and control

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abstract

Despite long traditions of management and leadership development it is only recently that organizations have become attracted to the notion of 'talent', to talent's apparent impact on organizational performance, and to the best ways of finding and deploying talent. In the context of organizational talent management, this article illustrates how the processes and politics of becoming and staying talented can be understood using insights from figurational sociology. We first discuss the features of talent status that figurational sociology helps to illuminate. Second, we apply figurational analysis to two aspects of exclusive talent management: maintaining organizational order and control, and being seen as talented. This is followed by a discussion of how figurational analysis can be used to explain individual performance in exclusive talent programs, and how talent programs can be treated as a means by which the holders of elite power can thwart dissent in order to maintain 'civilized' organizational order and control.

Introduction

Although organizations have long traditions of management and leadership development (Cappelli and Keller, 2017), it is only in the past 25 years that they have become attracted to the specific idea of 'talent', to talent's presumed impact on organizational performance, and to the best ways of

finding and deploying talent (Swailes, 2016). The upsurge of organizational interest in the notion of talent is often attributed to the 'war for talent' leitmotif (Michaels et al., 2001), and can be interpreted as a reaction to changing social, economic, and labour market conditions (Cappelli and Keller, 2017), particularly the rise of elite power (Picketty, 2014). The increasing focus on managing talent can thus be seen as a logical response to increasingly complex forms of organizing, and to the changing interdependencies between management, investors, labour and (to some extent) the State, which can be aligned very closely to the concerns of figurational sociology (Elias, 1983; 2012).

In organizational contexts, talent is a slippery concept with multiple meanings, ranging from a catch-all phrase covering the employees (and sometimes would-be employees) in an organization to the properties (talents) that people possess (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). In addition, and of primary interest to this paper, is the widespread use of 'talent' to represent a minority of employees who, through a series of organizational processes, are identified as having the potential to make a substantial contribution to the future of the organization. Where this happens in organizations, the small groups of 'talented' employees are typically subject to some sort of talent management system.

Although different approaches to talent management exist reflecting the number of people that an organization includes in a talent program (Swailes et al., 2014), for the purposes of this article we draw attention to what are often referred to as exclusive or elite talent management programs, which focus on identifying and developing a small percentage of high performing, high potential employees who are deemed to be more talented than the rest of the workforce. In particular, we treat talent management as the systematic identification of key positions, identifying pools of high performing and high potential individuals, and giving these individuals the differentiated development experiences needed for success in key organizational positions (Collings et al., 2017). This widely used definition, with its emphasis on the separation of groups of individuals with distinctive characteristics, clearly distinguishes talent management from human resource management and human resource development (Swailes, 2013).

Exclusive approaches dominate organizational practice partly because it is easier for organizations to focus attention across small groups of people and because it allows management elites to control their particular approach to organizing (Swailes, 2022). They also rely on processes of workforce differentiation (Collings, 2017) that distinguish between employees (and jobs) based on past, present and future contributions to organizing. The dominant theoretical justification for exclusive talent management draws on the resource-based view of the firm (Collings et al., 2019). The key argument here is that the rare skills that derive from the social relationships among groups of people can, if efficiently organized in ways that competing organizations struggle to imitate, act as a unique resource that provides a competitive advantage. Although this assumption lies at the heart of many organizational talent programs, the processes of becoming (seen as) talented and staying (recognized as) talented have received relatively little attention. While there is ample advice on *how* to identify high potential employees based on assessments of performance and potential (e.g., see Church et al., 2021; Silzer and Church, 2010), it usually underplays the influence of politics and power in decisions surrounding the identification of talent (Song and Wan, 2019; Zesik, 2020). Furthermore, the ways in which talent pools are experienced by participants, and potentially used by senior managers to consolidate their own positions, are less well understood.

What is lacking in the talent literature is a clearer understanding of the social processes that surround talent identification and the maintenance of talent status. Although studies of talent pool dynamics are now starting to appear (Clarke and Scurry, 2020; De Boeck et al., 2018; Zesik, 2020), empirical research typically explores individual reactions after the event. The experiences of individuals while they are in, or on the fringes of, talent pools have received little attention in the literature, and McDonnell et al. (2017: 86) have called for the use of 'more nuanced methodological perspectives'. This article responds to this call by drawing on insights from figurational sociology (also known as process sociology) (Elias 1983; 2012), which, through its focus on institutional and organizational processes, provides a framework through which the dynamics of talent recognition, individual behaviour in talent pools, and retaining talent status, can be conceptualised and studied. Because figurational sociology grew out of detailed analysis of changes in human

behaviour over time, it is ideally suited to comprehend the processes involved in explaining decisions that surround the behaviour of actors in particular talent contexts, and the ways in which different strategies help to preserve the order and control on which 'civilized' forms of organizing stand (van Iterson et al., 2002).

Also missing from the talent literature is a comprehensive framework that can explain the behaviour of the various actors (the talented, the line managers, the executives, the HR managers) who are linked by the rules and norms of talent programs within particular organizational contexts or figurations (van Iterson et al., 2002). For Elias (2012), figurations can be likened to the idea of social dances; those dancing at the start are unlikely to be dancing at the end; the music changes, people come and go, but the dance goes on. Figurations are thus constituted, Elias argues, by networks of relational interdependence that bind individuals together in conflict and cooperation (i.e., nations, communities, and organizations), and which exist independently *of,* but not without, the individuals and groups that comprise them. On this account, individual interests, intentions, actions, political power, and economic organization are entangled in complex and overlapping figurations of all sizes, thus bridging the agency-structure divide and other aspects of dualistic thinking by linking the behaviour of individuals more closely to organizational structures and processes.

The aim of this paper, and its primary point of departure from existing talent literature, is to apply figurational sociology (Elias, 1983; 2012; Baur and Ernst, 2011; Lever, 2011) to better understand the processes of becoming and staying talented, and in so doing provide a comprehensive framework for appreciating how and why individuals must regulate themselves if they are to stand any chance of success in competitive talent pools. Figurational sociology stresses the fact that people exist in relation to others and, in relation to talent status, it therefore provides a powerful lens for understanding how individual employees are located in fluctuating networks of interdependence (Stokvis, 2002) underpinned by asymmetrical power relations between individuals and groups within diverse forms of organization. A figurational approach thus connects related constructs in talent recognition processes (power, control, access to resources, and identity) that lie at the heart of talent management. As used in this article, it also provides a robust investigative framework that

facilitates a compelling explanation of the social and psychological constitution of talent identification and status in contemporary organizations (Elias, 2012; van Iterson et al., 2001).

The article proceeds as follows. First, we make connections between exclusive talent management and figurations to reveal the organizational developments that have led to the appearance of the talented as a distinct form of organizational subjectivity or *habitus* (van Krieken, 2018). Figurational ideas are then applied to talent identification, to the ways that talent management sustains order, and to staying talented. What is often seen as a rational response to performance-driven strategic human resource management and the new organizational forms brought about by the rise of free market economics can alternatively be seen, we argue, as the holders of elite power controlling powerful groups and thwarting dissent before it threatens their established position of power.

Talent in a figurational context

A typical starting point for organizations that seek to identify elite talent is to use some sort of systematic and objectified performance appraisal system. This may be supported by succession planning devices such as performance/promotability matrices in which individuals are judged on three levels of performance and promotability, which is itself a somewhat problematic concept (Jooss et al., 2021). In structured talent systems, reviews involving HR partners, line managers and executives are conducted to aggregate performance/promotability evaluations across divisions, regions and/or the organization in order to create agreed lists of employees deserving of differential investment. The differentiated development that the talented subsequently receive as members of talent pools typically involves experiences such as greater exposure to senior managers, involvement in higher-level strategic discussions, mentoring, structured development programs and working with talented *others* on high status projects. The elevated status of the talented is sometimes reflected in the use of labels such as Stars, A-players, B-players and super-keepers (Groysberg and Lee, 2010), all of which draws attention to the ways in which interdependent people are bound together in particular organizational figurations.

Within specific talent figurations, participants transition through several stages related to the development of individual organizational identity, with each stage revealing the importance of 'regulated behaviour' (Tansley and Tietze, 2013: 1813). Dries (2013) considered identity to be one of several conceptualisations of talent, while Debebe (2017: 420) suggested that social identity 'can thwart the course of an individual's talent development'. Linked to identity construction (Kamoche and Leigh, 2022) are the pressures that suppress the authenticity of the talented while simultaneously compelling them to conform to the expectations of others, all of which are required to be successful. This has been labelled a curse of talent management (Peteriglieri and Peteriglieri, 2017) and as an identity struggle (De Boeck et al., 2018).

Given the competitive and differentiating nature of talent identification (Taipale and Lindström, 2018) it is surprising that research on talent management is predominantly normative (Thunnissen et al., 2013); rarely questioning the assumption that it is beneficial, and rarely questioning the ability of organizations to identify talent in anything other than fair and equitable ways. This happens despite considerable evidence that points to biasing factors in the assessment of performance and potential such as impression management (Amaral et al., 2019), upwards influence (Martinescu et al., 2019), personal attractiveness (Dossinger et al., 2019) and gendered leadership (Johnson et al., 2008). This leaves little doubt that the conceptualisation of talent cannot be separated from its context (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen and van Arensbergen, 2015).

Although there is mounting evidence that some employees contribute much more to organizations than others (Aguinis and O'Boyle, 2014), a figurational approach is concerned less with objectifying talent and the accuracy of talent assessments, and more with understanding the processes by which people are judged to possess talent (to a greater or lesser extent) and the means by which talent comes to be recognized and/or de-recognized. We now turn to explore how figurational sociology provides a more nuanced understanding of the roles and posturing of the various actors engaged in talent recognition, and how talent pools can be interpreted as a way of controlling a potentially powerful stakeholder group, the talented. In doing so, we depart from much of the literature on organizational talent identification by problematizing the

idea that talent is something that can be objectified and identified in a consistently reliable way.

The civilizing impact of court society

Elias's (1983) study of court society is based on a comparison of the rationality of the aristocratic court elite and the professional bourgeois at the French court in the 17th century. Although both groups prioritised the long-term over momentary affects, the rationality of the professional bourgeois was more concerned with financial gain (economic capital) than the status and prestige claims (symbolic capital) privileged by the Aristocracy (van Krieken, 1998). The forms of behaviour regarded as irrational by the Protestant bourgeois (Weber, 1978) were highly regarded in court society, Elias argues, because it was important to exhibit one's status in order to retain one's position at court. Affective outbursts were thus extremely problematical, not only because they exposed a person's inner state, but because they broke the etiquette on which court society stood.

While the identity of courtiers was highly representational, power relations were also profoundly relational and an individual's power was likely to disappear just as quickly as their status and recognition. While the nobility needed the king to maintain their position within the wider courtly figuration, so the king needed the nobility, and his position of superiority lay solely in his ability to develop a strategy 'governed by the peculiar structure of court society in the narrow sense and more broadly by society at large' (Elias, 1983: 3). On one hand, the king needed the nobility as a basis for a collective culture, while on the other hand he needed them to act as a buffer between himself and the rest of the population. Though it may have been possible, at least in theory, for the nobility to collectively out-manoeuvre the king, the inherent competition of court life effectively undermined this possibility to a large extent – a situation the king played to his own advantage as and when needed. We suggest that analogies can be made here between the king and senior managers, and between the court and elite talent pools, whereby competition among the talented protects senior managers, and the talented act as a useful buffer zone between senior managers and the rest of the workforce.

In *The civilizing process,* Elias (2012) shows how the civilized code of behaviour that emerged at the court became ever more widely adopted through processes of state formation, where the increasing density of social relations had a profound impact on the psychological and emotional make-up of the individual. Individuals enmeshed in social and economic relations of ever-increasing complexity were, Elias (2012) argues, increasingly compelled to attune their behaviour to the demands of more and more other people or face the consequences of their (in)action – and it was this, Elias argues, that drove the civilizing process forward by pushing unacceptable behaviour behind the scenes of everyday life. As these processes advanced, van Vrieken (2012: 22) shows that courtiers became 'differentiated into a number of differentiated social types – the public servant, the politician's advisor, the manager, but also the celebrity, the witty, beautiful and talented focus of public scrutiny and attention with access to power'. These processes surrounding competition and opportunities for advancement are still evident today, and they are therefore useful, we contend, in understanding the complex forms of organizing revolving around exclusive talent management, in particular the identification and behaviour of the talented.

Contemporary organizational forms

Lever (2011) demonstrates the persistence of these organizational forms and their constituent rationalities over time in an analysis of cross-sector partnership working under New Labour governments in the UK during the 1990s. Much like regional courts in an earlier age, Lever argues that regional networks of community and citywide partnerships allowed successive New Labour administrations to pursue their own political ends by implementing management strategies that pitted individual partnership managers (and hence partnerships) against each other on a regular basis. It was only when the community-based forms of organization involved played the partnership game in ways that were closely aligned with dominant policy concerns (emanating from central government) that the resources to proceed, and ultimately succeed, were received. This often came about when individual managers learned that their success, and ultimately their partnership's success, depended on playing the partnership game in the required way, often to detriment of the concerns of other (less compliant) community-based forms of organization. Lever's wider argument is that this approach, much as

it did at the court, *paralyses rebellion* (de Swaan, 1990) from within by pitting individuals and groups against each other on a regular basis.

We argue that high potential employees who are organized into talent pools for development purposes can be seen as a distinctive stakeholder group (Swailes, 2013) in much the same way. In this account, individuals within the community from which talent is drawn will only start to receive recognition, and hence resources, when they align their needs (and hence talents) with the organization's wider agenda as espoused by senior management. Employees that play the dominant organizational game and respond to this agenda are thus far more likely to attract attention than those who do not; the non-talented are those who do not perform in the right way. Gameplaying of this type requires Weberian notions of self-observation and emotional suppression (Weber, 1989) and it follows that people who can observe and suppress their emotions in ways that match the rules of the game will have a greater chance of success (i.e., better outcomes) than those who do not. However, unlike Weber's rational individualism and its inherent focus on *ideal types*, figurational sociology allows us to examine and understand that the contemporary social processes associated with talent management are *real types* linked to long term historical trends revolving around organization, power and control (van Krieken, 2006).

What is particularly striking for our analysis is the persistence of these organizational forms and managerial subjectivities within talent pools. As individuals enter exclusive talent programs they are observed and encouraged to develop individual strategies that drive internal organizational stability and success in line with the concerns of elite discourses and powerful groups. This form of organizational control has emerged and become dominant, we argue, because it protects senior management and powerful elites from collective strategies from below that may threaten their position of power. Figurational analysis is significant in this sense, not least because it demonstrates how: 'Ceremonies and etiquette became essential instruments in the distribution of power' (Sofer, 2013: 28).

Figurations and talent recognition

Largely absent in the organizational talent literature is any sense of talent recognition as an on-going process in which decisions about today's talent are mired in past events and will inevitably be influenced by events to come. In much the same way that Louis XIV protected himself from his imaginative and ambitious courtiers by creating organizational arenas in which they could develop competing strategies (Elias, 1983; van Krieken, 2018), we argue that by grouping 'stars' together, leaders (who are always vulnerable) can alleviate threats to themselves in a similar way through management strategies that *paralyse rebellion* from within (de Swaan, 1990; Lever, 2011).

In *The civilizing process,* Elias (2012) shows that people are intensely sensitive to saying or doing things that would have them seen as unpredictable or signal that they are out of control; and the more people become aware of this, the greater their sensitivity to shame becomes. Fear of causing offence and of shame thus forces people to 'bottle' their emotional responses, but this also makes them more vulnerable to control stemming from those who spread stories about what is right and proper (Smith, 2002). This 'celebrity gossip' (van Krieken, 2012: 87) can emanate from senior managers, for example, through their views on what is important, on performance standards and the behaviour that receives favour in a particular work context. This is not to say that people who are not in talent pools feel ashamed not to be in them, but it serves to show how they become vulnerable to control and suppression because they would feel reluctant to risk shame by challenging the championed vision of what it means to be a high performer in a particular work setting.

Talent pools, where they are open and visible, provide everyone with an incentive to check the criteria against which they would be judged and to adjust as they see fit. Where they are less visible, practice may be more ambiguous, and it may be more difficult to maintain civilized forms of organizing (van Iterson et al., 2002). This issue of talent pool visibility deserves further consideration since not all talent pools are transparent (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). In a figurational sense, pools in which participants know they have been earmarked as talent, but which are largely hidden from view, can be viewed as part of a process of compartmentalization (de Swaan,

2001) through which a pool is separated from the wider organizational context by a 'wall of invisibility' (Lever and Milbourne, 2015: 308). In a talent context, the level of visibility can be expected to influence the behaviour of people in a pool, and the behaviour of senior managers towards it. The less visible and more hidden a pool is, the less pressure senior managers may be able to exert order and control over participants to foster 'civilized' organizational relations.

Another discipline of talent pools, and development programs more widely, is that membership exposes employees to the risk of shame by relegation, of being cast out of a pool to join a lower status group with little if any prospect re-joining the elite. Even if this happens discretely, a signal is nonetheless sent to others that continued high performance in a particular way is essential to remain in the pool. Talent pools also function as an organizational response to those (and there may be many) who see themselves as organizational underdogs – effectively discriminated against by virtue of their roles and/or their character. Publicising a vision of the behaviour and competences that the organization values, for example, in competence frameworks, acts to quell dissent that might threaten the established order. Talent criteria at least give an illusion that opportunities exist – employees just have to perform in the right way – while meanwhile acting to keep the bulk of a workforce in its place. Dignity is preserved, managers do not have to tell people that they do not make the grade, at least for now; self-assessment against a competence framework and against the people chosen to be in talent programs will do it for them.

Much like social relations at court, this competitive element maintains organizational differentiation. The behavioural norms and forms of organizational subjectivity that emerge in exclusive talent pools form social and spatial boundaries that normally only become visible if some transgression of etiquette and behavioural codes occurs. Talent, much like power, is a property of the connections a person has with other individuals in the wider organizational figuration. An employee connected to high performing and/or celebrified others is thus much more likely to be seen as one to watch than an employee who is not. Employees fortunate enough to be in a talent pool increase their connections within the wider figuration and therefore improve their chances of power and success, an effect observed with

management team members with CEO status (Graffin et al., 2008). Talent pools also act as reference points for others showing what one has to do to be liked and to get ahead and 'foreground oneself in relation to vast, anonymous business and government organizations seemingly beyond any individual's control' (van Krieken, 2012: 126). The contacts and the networks provided by structured, long-term talent programs provide the sustenance for establishing and growing the minor celebrity status of their participants, at least minor celebrities in the eyes of the managerial elite. Talent pools provide a production pipeline for future (even if short-lived) organizational celebrities by opening-up contacts and by providing opportunities for self-promotion and self-representation to others within and without the social spaces created by a talent pool.

Even minor celebrity status brings economic benefits consistent with the 'Matthew effect' (Merton, 1988). People who are well known attract more attention and resources for work comparable in quality to that produced by others who are less well known. In a world full of information, 'what is in short supply is the means to discriminate between what is on offer, and the capacity to attract attention' (van Krieken, 2012: 55). Organizing a small fraction of a workforce into talent pools creates a means by which attention can be allocated in a seemingly more efficient way. Individuals in talent pools take the risk that comes with exposing themselves to far greater scrutiny from senior managers, but the potential payoffs are large both economically (economic capital) and in terms of the even greater celebrity status (symbolic capital) on offer. Over and above any real managerial talent and capital that individuals have, being talented, we contend, cannot be separated from these processes.

For the talented, this comes at a price – and the price is the constant need to perform and be observed. Within contemporary organizational forms the self thus becomes increasingly performative and subject to ever-changing norms and forms of competition that blur the boundary between public and private life (van Iterson et al., 2002). As in court society, the talented must exhibit their status if they are to maintain it *and* their position in the organization. Their identity is thus highly representational and the power relations underpinning their position are likely to change just as quickly as their status and recognition when things go wrong. To maintain and cement their

position, the talented must therefore build alliances within the organization; any challenge to the established order, as in court society, is usually followed by a fall from grace (Elias, 1983).

Discussion and conclusions

As part of changing institutional figurations, the importance of searching for talent can be seen as an example of an idea that has spread through some fields (more than others) because it has become a legitimate part of the external environment that forms part of the organization's 'outer identity' (Hernes, 2004: 35). This identity acts to reassure individuals and groups that have an interest in the organization. As the popularity of reality TV demonstrates, these ideas are at work within and outside organizations across wider society, where the identification of small groups of people as celebrities (talent) 'helps to reduce social complexity and provides dense bundles of symbolic and cultural capital around which social life can be organized' (van Krieken, 2012: 8). In the same way that management innovations and models of organization spread as rationalized myths, and not necessarily because they are best suited to performance improvement (Greenwood et al., 2017), talent management has diffused through certain organizational fields to become part of the recipe for organizing in common with certain grander structural forms. This diffusion is assisted by the subjectivity of talent management (Swailes, 2016), since subjectivity is a key driver of isomorphic behaviour among firms in the same field (van Krieken, 2006).

Despite the large and growing literature on talent management, we know little about the mechanisms of the core processes of becoming and staying recognized as talented beyond the problematic and normative assumptions of fair and accurate performance appraisal. The analogy with court behaviour reveals the civilizing impact of talent programs within organizations, while raising questions about the underlying long-term trends. From a figurational perspective, talent programs allow different forms of organizing to control individual subjects by observing their performance in rituals where particular forms of etiquette are required. The talented are only provided with fleeting access to their organizational superiors at these rituals, and they must

perform and develop their own individual strategies on a regular and ongoing basis to further and to maintain their access.

Much as kings and queens in earlier periods adopted strategies to control their courtiers and noblemen by playing them off against each other at court (Elias, 1983), so talent programs, we contend, help to keep the ambitions of the talented in check, thus allowing those holding organizational power to pursue agendas consistent with dominant and powerful elite discourses. While the talented need the CEO and senior managers to maintain their position within the talent figuration, so the CEO and senior managers need the talented, and their position of superiority lies solely in their ability to develop strategies that can manage fluctuating tensions within specific organizational contexts; arguably by *paralysing rebellion* from within by pitting talented individuals and groups against each other (de Swaan, 1990; Lever, 2011). Using Elias's (2012) metaphor of social dances, an exclusive talent program can thus be seen as an organizational dance implemented to keep the talented busy and suppress internal organizational tension and dissent.

At a broad level, talent management employs a range of theoretical perspectives (see Dries, 2013; Glaister et al., 2018). However, despite a steady stream of papers in the past 25 years, there has been little critical examination of the core, central processes of becoming and staying talented, an omission that we have attempted to address. Throughout this paper we have shown how figurational analysis provides a way of visualising the processes surrounding the recognition and behaviour of talented employees, as well as the events that shape their reactions across time (King, 2016). Self-regulation is an important component of the behaviour that figurational conditions affect to a greater or lesser extent, and questions therefore arise about how particular spatial and organizational conditions compel individuals to act out more or less civilized forms of behaviour (Clegg and van Iterson, 2013; Lever, 2011). While talent recognition is ostensibly based on assessments of performance and potential, there is also a substantial role played by cultural distances between individual actors, individual positions in networks, homophily between participants (Mäkelä et al., 2010; Wheelan et al., 2010) and proximity to strong colleagues (Claussen et al., 2014).

Figurational sociology is well-suited to understanding how these effects work in specific organizational contexts, and we have explained why some individuals (more than others) come to be recognized as talented in terms of their ability to participate in, and successfully negotiate, a path through a talent pool or program. Moreover, our analysis illustrates how talent programs help to facilitate organizational differentiation in an upwards and a downwards direction by identifying individuals with the psychological orientation and disposition (or *habitus*) (van Krieken, 2018) to identify with the needs of their superiors and subordinates simultaneously. Elias's (1983) ideas about performativity, theatricality and competing power bases in the 'strategic projection of symbolically constituted identity' (van Krieken, 2012: 16) thus provide, we conclude, key insights into contemporary organizational forms, and the role of talent programs in identifying individuals who can fulfill this role.

Contribution to the talent literature

The figurational approach that we have outlined contributes to our understanding of talent management by drawing attention to fluctuating interdependencies between people. It reveals how certain processes (may) work and how self-regulation and self-awareness are interlinked, such that awareness of one's position and the social capital of others influence the extent to which a person regulates their behaviour in a constantly shifting figuration of sub-ordinates, peers and organizational superiors. It also explains how individuals in talent development programs are alert and attuned to their specific and unique contexts, and how their potential and achievements are in turn limited by those contexts.

Our figurational analysis also addresses the core assumption that development is a function of both a person's innate qualities and the development opportunities that are open to them. In particular, it helps to explain why development interventions may have small effects on some people and larger effects on others; success is proportional to a person's standing in a figuration and their ability to move successfully within it. This mobility is to some extent a feature of an individual's connections, and of their ability to leverage those connections. Figurational approaches provide a way of examining how the particular dynamics of talent identification, and

the development strategies used in an organization, influence the behaviour of participants and others affected by them, and how this affects individual and organizational outcomes. This is an important step since understanding how individual-level outcomes aggregate into organizational-level outcomes remains an underdeveloped area (Garavan et al., 2015).

Viewing talent management through a figurational lens also helps to appreciate *how* management interventions connect to performance and explain why development programs do not deliver reproducible results. The events that arise in a particular program differ from any other program, sometimes beneficial sometimes not, and appreciating how individuals interpret and respond to controlling forces, how they align with dominant power sources, and how others use power to favour their own situations is critical to understanding the effectiveness of talent programs and of people development more widely. The present article shows how the core components of a figurational approach provide a way of understanding behaviour in talent pools and shows why they can be effective for some people and less effective for others.

Implications for talent research

Our analysis opens new research avenues around the 'circuits of power' (van Krieken, 2012: 8) that produce talent, and how the talented cope with contrasting emotions and changing self-esteem in diverse forms of organization. Indeed, being recognised as talented and admitted to a talent pool arguably puts the talented in a *double-bind* (Elias, 2007), a situation within which they must show initiative and imagination whilst also recognizing that they are under pressure to continually align their talents with the organization's agenda. These insights suggest three broad research questions: 1) to what extent is a person's authenticity suppressed in light of the expectations of others in and around talent programs? 2) How do people adjust their demeanour to stay in the talent spotlight? 3) To what extent does the visibility of a talent pool impact on the suppression of authenticity and the ability to retain talent status?

As figurations are never static and always in a state of 'tensile equilibrium' (Elias, 1978: 131), research methods must be capable of capturing the human

interdependencies being studied. In studying the figurations surrounding talent it is necessary to identify the conditions in which they were created and how they developed out of previous organizational figurations. Exploring the asymmetrical nature of power within the figuration and the inequalities that are present between established insiders (with prestige, power, esteem) and outsiders is also central. This would reveal the 'shape' of a talent figuration, at least for a time, and how those involved use and display their symbols of power, for example, by controlling discussion topics and making judgements about what is right for the organization, and hence the talented, to focus on. Focussing on displays of power and status among established groups reveals, on this account, how resources and dominant agendas are operationalized, as well as the ways in which power develops and shifts in pools through the ascendancy or decline of individuals.

As we have demonstrated, the inception, operation and evolution of exclusive talent systems constitute a very complex set of asymmetrical social interactions. Figurational analysis has the potential to provide realistic (what Elias refers to as reality congruent) and detailed accounts of how and why organizations become attracted to the idea of talent, how figurations form around it, how its functions change across time and, perhaps, how attraction to talent loses its meaning and functionality only to be superseded by a functionality of a different sort. Figurational models, however, are never an end point as they are always changing and in flux. As such, figurational studies usually require detailed mapping of the interdependencies that enable some organizational members and constrain others (Castrén and Ketokivi, 2015) and research methods that are better suited to unravelling the extent of perceived pressure on individuals and the specific emotions and behaviours that people self-regulate. They are also suited to exploring the subjective experiences of self-regulation and to unravelling the devices that individuals use to cope with masking authenticity. This will further an understanding of how feelings are experienced and how they are managed, and of what is meaningful to individual actors in terms of how they perceive and protect themselves from threats and challenges.

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