Multicultural Teamwork—Unification of Differences in Digitalized Work Contexts?

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Abstract The following article addresses the phenomenon of increasingly multicultural, organizational teams in digitalized work contexts. It deals with the cooperation amongst and in such teams as well as the resulting formation of relationship networks—called figurations. The research focuses on blue-collar workers. A situational individual case study from the field of storage and distribution work analyzes the relationship networks between team leaders and team members and the extent to which culture influences cooperation. A figurative-analytical perspective—mainly based on the study “The Established and the Outsiders” by Elias and Scotson (1994)—is applied to shed light on the above-mentioned phenomena and to reveal interrelations. Within the framework of a qualitative research design, guided by the grounded theory methodology, eleven interviews and six days of participatory observation were conducted in order to derive a theory of a permeable unified storage culture based on elaborated core categories, which leads to a unification of differences in digitalized work contexts. Furthermore, the findings show that the increasing digitalized structures in the observed company supports this. Simultaneously, this storage culture impacts the exposed established outsider figuration, but is influenced by it in an analogous manner.

1 Introduction

By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart (Confucius [5]).

In times of increasing border-crossing, organizational activities in the course of the advancing digitalization, globalization and the associated increase in multicultural, organizational teams, the topic of interculturality—although not a new one—represents a current and relevant issue. Marquardt and Horvath [23] describe the building
of high-performance multicultural teams as one of the greatest challenges for organizations in the twenty-first century and as the only way to succeed in a globalized and digitalized environment. Consequently, the consideration of different cultures appears to be a criterion for success, especially for globally operating organizations. Dealing with different cultures within the company is also decisive for the value-added process, especially with regard to cooperation in multicultural teams. The preoccupation with humanly staffed, multicultural teams also raises the question of the distinctions or determinants through which various relationship networks are formed. Several studies are concerned with the intercultural cooperation of organizational teams. The focus of these studies is mainly on white-collar workers. However, the field of blue-collar workers is disregarded. In this respect, this study focuses on the cooperation of low-skilled blue-collar workers in the storage and logistics sector. Thus, the phrase “all people are equal, but some are more equal than others” borrowed from Orwell’s fable “Animal Farm” can be read as a reference to the formation of unequal relationship networks, despite all declarations of equality, and thus serves as a basis for the development of the research question: Which figurations are formed in organizational teams with multicultural staff in digitalized work contexts and to what extent does culture influence the cooperation?

The study “The Established and the Outsiders” by Elias and Scotson [9] as well as essential findings from research on culture and intercultural cooperation [25, 40] serve as a theoretical basis. The empirically verifiable answers to the questions contained in this study base on figurative-analytical research. Accordingly, the present study builds on a total of six days of participatory observation as well as eleven themed, partially structured individual interviews with team members and experts. The grounded theory methodology guides the collection and analysis of the data material in order to derive a theory of a permeable unified storage culture based on elaborated core categories. Furthermore, findings of the present study show that the digital structures in the analyzed company favor this development. Simultaneously, this storage culture impacts the exposed established outsider figuration, but is influenced by it in an analogous manner.

The following chapter divides into eight sections. Following the introductory remarks of Sect. 1, which outlines the structure and content of the study, Sect. 2 presents an examination of figuration sociology and the relevant conceptual delimitations in the style of Elias. Furthermore, the presentation of the study “The Established and the Outsiders” by Elias and Scotson [9] follows in order to apply it to the organizational context. Section 3 provides a brief overview of the concept of culture. In addition, Sect. 4 discusses the state of the art of relevant studies in order to identify research desiderata, to clarify the relevance of the research questions and to situate the study in the organizational discourse. Section 5 describes fieldwork and

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1White-collar workers are the employees/managers, whereby blue-collar workers are workers [27, p. 21].
2Low-skilled work includes activities that do not require special professional qualifications and can be carried out after a short period of education or settling in [14, p. 3].
3Original wording: “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others” [28].
data collection. The empirical material is composed of eleven guided interviews as well as participatory observations in the investigated company. The evaluation and interpretation of the interview transcripts carries out with the help of the methodology mentioned above. The resulting core categories and the theory of a unified storage culture derived as well as the figuration inherent in this culture are discussed in more detail in Sect. 6. This characterizes the core of the present study. Section 7 is devoted to the discussion of the study results, while Sect. 8 compiles the results and provides an outlook on the possibilities for further connections and associated research questions.

2 Basic Study: Elias and Scotson—The Established and the Outsiders

The task of figure-analytical research is to represent subjective experience by the actors and behaviors within a network of relationships in such a way that the essential characteristics of the underlying figuration structure are understandable [43]. According to Baur and Ernst [1], figurative sociological analysis in this context focuses on social (macro) and individual (micro) processes, but also on network of relationships (figuration) as a whole.

Elias and Scotson [9] substantiate the theoretical assumptions on figuration and power or balances of power in their figural-analytical study “The Established and the Outsiders”. Elias does not understand the human being as an individual separated from society and the latter not as a human-free system. The basic idea is that figurations represent networks of human relationships that are interdependent with one another. Through this interdependence, which can also be described as entanglement, the concept of figuration is distinguished from the concept of interaction [41, p. 138]. It is not the mere accumulation of individuals that is referred to as figuration. The indissoluble intertwining of the actors in a dynamic process characterizes the term (ibid.). The figurations thus do not represent a static entity, but a constantly changing, dynamic process. According to Elias and Scotson [9], a “compelling force” emanates from the figurations:

There is a certain abhorrence against the idea that ‘societies’ or to put it less equivocally the configurations which individuals form with each other exercise some power over the individuals which form them and limit their freedom. Yet whatever our wishes may be, looking simply at the available evidence, one cannot get away from the recognition that configurations limit the scope of the individual’s decisions and in many ways have a compelling force even though this power does not reside as it is often made to appear outside individuals, but merely results from the interdependence between individuals [9, p. 172].

The concept of figuration takes into account not only relational aspects, but also the continuous possibility of change—the dynamics—of figurations. Because of their fundamental interdependence with each other, people always group themselves together in the form of specific figurations. These patterns remain even when a society disintegrates. The coexistence of people in societies always has a very specific form,
even in chaos, in disintegration, and in the greatest social disorder. This is what the term figuration expresses [10]. Elias considers the changeability of human beings as natural: It belongs to the peculiarities of human beings that they are by nature changeable in a special way [10, p. 139]. He points out that he used the concept of figuration, which people form together, to describe an image of human beings. He understands this as a conceptual tool appropriate to reality, which avoided the compulsion, that is much discussed in sociology, to regard the individual and society as two different, antagonistically opposed figures [10].

Central to Elias' figurative sociology is also the concept of the power that individuals have over one another through their mutual dependence. Through the described dynamic process character of the human networks of relationships, the power inherent in them is not static per se, but also dynamic [13]. For Elias, power is therefore not an amulet that one person possesses and the other does not possess, it is a structural characteristic of human relationships—of all human relationships [10]. The core of interpersonal relationships represents these balances of power, which are indicators of the reciprocal relationships of dependence in which individuals find themselves. Consequently, there are no one-sided dependency relationships. The inequality of opportunity reflects in the everyday power and competition between people: It is quite conceivable that someone who appears to be relatively powerless one day may experience an increase in power the next day and thus be more powerful than before. The balance of power is therefore not static, but changeable. Power is consequently a social process for Elias. The basis for these assumptions is, among other things, the study “The Established and the Outsiders” by Elias and Scotson [9], which is presented below.

The study describes the formation of groups in different contexts that can be defined as ‘superior’ (established) and ‘inferior’ (outsiders). It is an empirical-theoretical study conducted by the researchers in 1958 and 1959. The authors refer to it as “configurational theory in action” [9, p. 171]. Figuration is thus not exclusively a conceptual figure of thought, but also an empirical paradigm [31]. The researchers use principles of the grounded theory methodology in their survey and evaluation [9].

The studied population of a small English suburban community, which the authors call Winston Parva, differs marginally due to its socio-structural characteristics. The figuration arises along the distinction between old-established and newly arrived families. Elias and Scotson [9] describe this figuration as established outsider figuration, with the old-established being among the established and the newcomers among the outsiders [41, p. 138f., 9]. In this context, a status ideology crystallizes, in which the established classify themselves as better, more civilized and more likeable people. The established subsequently stigmatize the outsiders as not belonging and differently (ibid.). The authors highlight various determinants that help to create and maintain power differentials and thus contribute to maintaining the social separation of the two groups [9, 31]. Analogously, they may be regarded as mutually reinforcing aspects.

The constituting factor for differentiating the groups is in turn the length of residence at the location [9]. The long-established residents share a common past and a
consistent canon of values and norms. They have known each other for two or three
generations. The cohesion in the group is—in contrast to that of the immigrants, who
are strangers both to the old-established and to each other—correspondingly great,
they have a higher cohesion potential (ibid.). In order to maintain group identity,
they try to protect themselves from the immigrants who they perceive as a threat [9].
The different lengths of stay accompanied by a geographical and spatial separation
of the groups prevent contacts that exceed the professional necessity: “As outsiders
are felt to be anomic, close contact with them threatens a member of an established
group with ‘anomic infection’” (ibid., p. 24). This infection needs to be avoided at
all costs. The group punishes deviations from the norm as taboo breaks. The own
group sanctions attempts to approach members of the other two groups by subjecting
the members to strong social control. In addition, it is necessary to verbally exclude
them from the group by “blame-gossip” (ibid., p. 40). Moreover, Elias and Scotson
state that the status ideology is one of the most important aspects of the established
outsider figuration and express in the construction of the foreign and the self on the
side of the established. One’s own group continually classifies as the better one, while
the members of the other group “lumped them all together as people less well bred.”
(ibid., p. 16). Thus, no more distinctions are made between individuals. The group as
a whole is stigmatized as unreliable and dirty (ibid., p. 125 ff) in order to establish an
anomic minority which makes it possible to legitimize the social superiority of one’s
own group [31]. In this situation the less strong members of the group absorb the
disgrace as their self-image, which leads to their further degradation [9]. They point
out that if you assign a bad name to a group, sooner or later the group will conform
to that name. At this point, the researchers accentuate that the actors are trapped in
a double-bind (ibid., p. 31 f). The outsiders are indeed dependent on the toleration
by the group of the established, but the established group needs the presence and
the assigned characteristics of the outsider group for its self-construction. The estab-
lished group thus needs the outsiders. The selective distribution of positions of social
power is another factor of subordination. The established group occupies important
offices in the community through the exclusion of the outsider group. Thus, power
differentials arise from the potential for cohesion of the established group.

According to Elias and Scotson [9], the described figuration of the established
outsider relations shows recurring regularities and divergences. Nevertheless, the
figurations, for all their changeability, have some common features: In essence, one
group always creates the figuration by excluding another group from its status and
power, creating a monopoly for itself. The exclusion can be strong or weak. One
aspect to be emphasized, for example, is the passing on of knowledge (as a means
of power): Communication, knowledge transfer—from group to group or from indi-
vidual to individual—and accordingly the refusal to transfer knowledge never only
affect the cognitive side of human relations, but also always the power relations. In
addition, the subgroups are potentially dangerous, which creates a certain fear of
each other. The collective self-enhancement then contributes to the integration of the
group and thus secures its chances for survival (ibid., p. 45).
Transfer to the Organizational Context

The study described above considers organizational contexts only superficially. Although members of both groups work partly in the same factories, under the same conditions the researchers deny these contexts a socially integrating effect that goes beyond the organizational needs and do not investigate them further [31]. Against the background, that the organization in the present contribution is to be viewed from the perspective of the established outsider figuration, it seems necessary to shed light on the characteristic framework conditions and the differences to the original study by Elias and Scotson [9]. In the specific case of the present study on intercultural cooperation in organizational teams in digitalized contexts, the focus is on the analysis of relations in and between three different teams (logistics and storage sector) of a company with an international workforce. With the help of the empirical paradigm of figuration described above, it is possible to shed light on different, individual and group-related decision-making and action options [13, p. 23]. A common feature of the framework conditions of a community and an organization is, for example, the hierarchical structure. The offices of pastor and mayor are, for example, positions of high status and social power. According to Elias and Scotson, the position of power is secured by the occupation of office within the community with representatives of the established group. In an organization these positions of social power represent the representation of employees’ interests (works council) and—in the present case—by the team leaders and the storage management [13]. In the local company, the team leaders take over the management and coordination of several selected teams. It is worth mentioning that in this company there is no more stock management. The team leaders therefore no longer have a direct superior. The next management level is the plant manager. Another special feature of organizations is the formation of complex patterns of diverse, heterogeneous sub-groups through the interaction of various aspects of discrimination, such as age, gender, origin and cultural ideas, ownership, qualifications and work specialization based on the division of labor [31]. Since management can use formal authority to influence all other groups of participants without being able to influence them in the same way, it forms a special group of actors. Through the possibilities of influence, it is possible to shape the figurations between the participants (ibid).

3 The Concept of Culture

Research on and with multicultural teams and their intercultural cooperation requires a prior examination of the concept of culture, as it opens up a multitude of possible definitions. In everyday language the term is extremely familiar and is often used inflationary in various central social issues. Especially in the social sciences the use of the term is very heterogeneous [38, 39, 44]. Different definitions will be briefly considered in the following in order to highlight a suitable specification for this contribution. In the strictest sense of the word, the concept of culture stands
in contrast to what nature prescribes. For example, nature has dictated that man must drink in order to survive. However, what, how and where he drinks can be freely shaped [34]. Consequently, culture is always a product of various forms of design and refers to what has been learned and created and thus to ways of acting and thinking, but also to materially created things [34]. A comprehensive definition, which serves as the theoretical starting point for the present study, is that of Kroeber and Kluckhohn [20]. The authors have analyzed more than 150 different views of culture and subsequently worked out a summarizing definition:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action (ibid., p. 181).

A more recent definition by the cultural anthropologist Maletzke [22] is similarly comprehensive. He considers culture essentially as a system of concepts, beliefs, attitudes, an value orientations. These can be found in the behavior and actions of individuals as well as in their spiritual and material products. In short, according to this concept, culture represents the way humans live and what they do with themselves and their world [22]. Accordingly, both views take up cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects and their underlying values as facets on the one hand, while on the other hand, they list the historical perspective and the influence of symbols as a possibility of transferring cultural achievements as dynamic facets [30]. Thomas [40] suggests a practical definition, albeit not covering all aspects, against the background of dealing with improving cooperation between people from different cultural backgrounds. According to Thomas [40], culture is a universal phenomenon. All people live in a specific culture and refine it. Culture structures a field of action specific to the population, ranging from objects created and used to institutions, ideas and values. Culture always manifests itself in an orientation system typical of a nation, society, organization or group. Specific symbols form this orientation system and it is passed on to the next generation in the respective society, organization or group. The orientation system defines defines their membership in the society or group for all members and and enables them to cope with their own environment (ibid.). Following Moosmüller [25], the definition of culture comprises two further essential aspects in addition to that of the orientation system, which provides standards for action: Firstly, culture is understood as a self-constructed network of meaning. Secondly, culture is seen as an individual culture, which influences the perception, thinking and action of individuals as a “mental program” [15] resp. mentality or as “habitus” [4, 7]. Culture is thus not an ever-present entity, but is regarded as socially constructed, complex and dynamic. Beyond that, culture is an internalized construct that is very closely interwoven with personality [25]. The dynamic character of culture immediately shows similarities to the dynamic characteristics of human figurations described above. The action-oriented view seems to be suitable for the present contribution since it primarily intends to deal with the cooperation of people of different origins in teams.
An assumption for the further course of this work will thus be that cultural influences have a decisive influence on the perception, thinking, values and actions of individuals in the respective society.

Regarding the definition of the concept of culture described above, strong similarities to the concept of corporate culture become apparent. Based on the definition of Sackmann [32], it is therefore possible to transfer the results of dealing with culture in general to the corporate culture and thus to the context of the organization. On this basis, the research question can be answered.

The orientation system accentuated by Thomas [40] offers on the one hand possibilities or incentives for action, but on the other hand it defines the conditions for action and has limitations. It thus makes it possible to generate a sufficiently large stock of knowledge about the material and social environment and to gain experience in dealing with it in order to use it appropriately and effectively (ibid.). With regard to the research guiding question, transferred to the organizational context, it is necessary to examine whether this orientation system also functions in the world of employment. The persons, objects, events, procedures, processes and behavioral sequences surrounding the individual can be attributed meaning and significance. The process of creating meaning usually takes place unconsciously and automatically, i.e. without great psychological effort, and is therefore an individual achievement sui generis. Its emergence, however, is not random and arbitrary, but follows a collective, socially binding system of norms and rules that has a culturally mediating effect. In addition to the system of orientation, instruments (theories, methods, rules, norms, etc.) for adaptation and innovation are acquired in the course of the socialization process, with the help of which the individual can orientate and find his way [40]. These characteristics are also transferable in the broadest sense to the structures in the researched company. Targeted leadership and training of employees convey the applicable standards, methods and rules (see also induced culture change Fig. 1). Furthermore, the digitalized structures offer assistance in finding one’s way around the storage structures and in minimizing resp. eliminating errors. Both, the orientation system and the ability to adapt and innovate, do not, however, provide reliable security if the interaction partners come from different departments within the company or from other companies, or generally be described as external to the company. In general, there is the possibility of critical interaction situations in which unexpected behavior or unexpected reactions occur on the part of the interaction partners since they cannot derive these from their usual orientation systems.

With respect to the introductory quotation from Confucius [5], it can therefore be assumed that the distinguishing habits are to a large extent traceable to the different cultures. The extent to which culture or cultural heterogeneity influences teamwork

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4“The set of fundamental beliefs held in common by a group, which is typical of the group as a whole. This set of fundamental beliefs influences the perception, thinking, acting and feeling of the group members and can also manifest itself in their actions and artifacts. The fundamental beliefs are no longer consciously held, they have emerged from the experience of the group and have developed further through the experience of the group, i.e. they have been learned and are passed on to new group members” [32, p. 42].
in digitalized work contexts and the figurations that crystallize in the process will be clarified in the following.

4 Placement of the Research in the Organizational Discourse

Considering the epistemological interest of the article, two lines of discourse appear to be significant. One is the research on (intercultural) cooperation in organizational teams, the other the transfer of figuration-sociological approaches to the workforce in an organization.

With regard to the status quo of the current research discourse on (intercultural) cooperation, numerous studies deal with the effects of diversity on team performance or cooperation within the company. However, the results can sometimes vary depending on what study is consulted. Klöppel [21] and van Knippenberg and Schippers [19], for example, conclude that the advantages and disadvantages in mixed teams cancel each other out and that the probability of success depends on diversity management. Other authors point out the improved possibilities through greater diversity. Cox and Blake [6], for example, elaborate the “value in diversity” hypothesis, from which they derive that diversity has an added value for corporate processes (ibid.). The cultural heterogeneity of the workforce, especially for international companies, is an aspect from which they hope to gain competitive advantages. This hope is guided by the assumption that cultural differences can trigger processes of reflection and learning. As a result, these teams are in many cases more creative, innovative and adaptable [37].

The findings of our study, therefore, suggest that diversity in teams can potentially provide organizations with competitive advantages if they consider these results in determining the composition of teams while discarding a simple, myopic understanding that team diversity has a uniform effect on team outcomes [17, p. 1009].

Although the hypothesis has been confirmed several times, some research studies show contradictory findings. The teams with homogeneous workforces produced better results at different levels than the heterogeneous teams [17, 18]. One reason for these results is the increased conflict potential—e.g. due to different ages, different cultures, gender differences or language differences—of teams with a diverse workforce [24]. Consequently, different factors influence the success of multicultural teams. The task, the requirement profiles and qualifications of the members, the leadership of multicultural teams, and the working atmosphere and organizational culture play a decisive role [18, 24].
The research outlined so far agrees that the challenges of internal and external cultural diversity are coming to the fore because of advancing globalization, digitalization and the increasing cultural diversity in the organizational workforce. Moosmüller [26], in his contribution to the “Global Organization Man”, accentuates the necessity of rethinking for globally operating organizations (ibid.). His focus is on highly qualified white-collar workers and the book “The Organization Man” by Whyte [42]. The “organization man” described by Whyte would have had its day [26]. The “global organization man”, which embodies an ideal type of employee who is highly qualified, globally oriented, flexible and interculturally competent, replaces him (ibid.). He concludes that subjectively perceived contradictions are only intensified by facilities such as gated communities\(^5\) and special housing facilities for expatriates. The affected people do not learn about the everyday culture and the prevailing living conditions, but they are forced to pretend this knowledge in order to fulfill expectations. This circumstance leads to the conception of intercultural illusory knowledge (ibid.). Finally, if several globally active employees are brought into the same dilemma, serious damage can be caused by this intercultural pseudo-knowledge at both individual and organizational level. The focus of this chapter is on the highly qualified employees of an organization. Although the present study focuses on low-skilled employees, the work of Moosmüller [26] provides interesting impulses for subsequent research.

Furthermore, Schmidt [33] examines the social relationships in the everyday working life of people of different origin in relation to the functional mechanisms of social integration in companies. In this respect, he elaborates the form of “pragmatic cooperation” (ibid., p. 481). The studies also show a potential for conflict—for example due to the preferences of German employees (ibid.). According to the results, these conflicts gradually dissolve “in the everyday life of cooperation in the work process” (ibid). Even though the companies studied do not have a special diversity management system, the social integration of the employees seems to be positive. However, the normative guidelines are conveyed through a kind of “company universalism” (ibid., p. 482), which is not designed to recognize and emphasize ethnic diversity. In this way, the companies run the risk of institutionalizing the differences of multiculturalism and thus preventing assimilation (ibid.).

The usefulness of applying figuration concepts to the organizational context is demonstrated by Becke [2] in his study on figuration between an organization and external actors, by [3] in their research on the organization itself as figuration, and by Ernst [11] in his observation of figurations within teams in an organization. In these cases, the organizations represent closely related levels of investigation. Rybnikova and Cardone [31] transfer the established outsider figuration according to Elias and Scotson [9] to the organizational context and, in the process, examine the temporary employment relationships in a case study from the automotive supplier industry. Among other things, the meaningfulness of transferring figuration-sociological theories to concepts of organizational research clarifies here [31, p. 146]. Furthermore,

\(^5\)The aim of this concept is to provide travelers all over the world with similar living conditions and thus convey a feeling of “home-away-from-home” [26].
the relevance of not regarding the marginal as well as the core workforce as separate, independent actors are emphasized. Rather, they are they are managed as dependent and closely interrelated actors. They constitute their positions of power in interdependent dependence on each other (ibid.). The study by Rybnikova and Cardone [31] provides interesting results and approaches for fundamental considerations on the present research. Nevertheless, multicultural differences or intercultural cooperation are not taken into account. The following research made an attempt to close this gap as well as include and shed light on cultural differences.

5 Field Access and Data Collection

This study deals with the application of everyday practice in the world of employment. In order to do justice to this claim, both participatory observations and qualitative, partially standardized interviews are used to collect empirical data. For the present study, the teams were observed on five working days and one Saturday for the duration of one shift. The observation protocols serve as a documentation of the observations and the interviews conducted in this context. The focus of the observations was on the three teams A, B, C. However, it was possible to gain additional insights into other teams by participating in daily work. This temporal arrangement was chosen as this approach creates a basis of trust and helps to decisively select the interviewees. The interviews took place with a time delay (about one week) following the observations. This temporal arrangement seems to be reasonable, because during the observations, this approach creates already a basis of trust, and it helps to make a decided selection of the interviewees. Qualitative, semi-standardized interviews were used in the present study [16] and are considered a typical form of a qualitative methodological structure in which more or less openly formulated questions are brought into the interview situation in the form of a guideline, to which the interviewee is supposed to respond freely [12]. This form of interview design is particularly suitable for the planned survey, as it offers a diverse scope in the formulation of questions and different demand strategies. Moreover, despite the orientation towards an interview guideline, the sequence of questions to be asked is variable [16]. As a result, in addition to the comparison between interviews, restrictions due to the interview procedure in the intended topics are minimized [35]. In addition, expert interviews with team leaders were conducted.
For the present study, the storage facility and logistics center were considered. In particular, three teams and the corresponding managers are the focus of this research. In this context, a total of eleven interviews were conducted with employees and the team leaders. In addition, observations were performed on six days. This study is thus based on interviews with team members, who represent blue-collar workers [27], and with experts as well as on participatory observations of the cooperation of multicultural teams (means employees with heterogeneous national and/or ethnic origin) in everyday working life.

6 Unification of Differences?

In the following, it is essential to illustrate and describe the theory anchored in the empirical data by means of the combination of key and core categories (Fig. 1), as well as to show the location of the identified figuration and the influence of culture in digitalized work contexts. To that end, the model is presented with reference to the core categories investment in employees, permeability, storage culture and self and third-party construction.

![Fig. 1 Model of the unified storage culture (own figure)](image-url)
An induced cultural change modifies the existing foreign cultures by investing in the employees through leadership, control and by unifying digitalized structures. It must be emphasized that they are not eliminated or rejected. Moreover, the induced culture change is not permanently modifying them outside the storage context.

The definition of culture is largely transferable to the phenomenon of storage culture. In this way, a separate storage culture is forming in which the various foreign cultures play no or a very subordinate role. Nevertheless, the various cultures influence the storage culture in its constitution. In order to achieve the goal that the different cultures play a subordinate role in the storage culture, a management adapted to the cultural differences is necessary. The cultures must consequently play a role in order to then play no or a small role.

Investment in Employees and Permeability

When leaving the storage facility, whether during breaks or at the end of a working shift, the individuals fall back into their old, native patterns of behavior and classification. The employees experience this permeability several times a day. The term permeability in the conceived theory stands for the stringent transparency of the process. This is where the dynamic character of the present model becomes apparent: The process is not only possible in one direction, there is always the possibility to return to the previous state.

Accordingly, the investment in employees represents an important aspect for the modification of the foreign culture into the storage culture. In this case, it is a form of management and control over the team members. Ideally, they get to know what they are supposed to convey as well as the values and norms through explanation in order to create understanding and to secure them in their work:

Then, however, their security comes into play—that is a great need for me […] you just have to explain to people why they are doing something and then working is also much easier afterwards (employee, Team C, line 42).

The type of leadership is important in order to achieve the desired result of an integrated and accepted storage culture. At this point, a discrepancy between self-construction and external construction becomes apparent. The team members do not necessarily have the feeling to experience an investment:

I said: ‘So where’s the problem? This is my workplace. So why is there a problem. You don’t work here.’ ‘Well, cause I’m the boss’ That’s his answer. I said ‘Ohhh now I understand. You’re one of those kind of team leaders. ‘No matter what I do ‘I’m the boss’ I say ahhh ok. Great. Great team leaders’ (employee, Team B, line 46).

The team leaders see this kind of leadership as an investment: “Well, we have a lot of patience. If you could see what we invest in people, how we respond to personal events and so on” (team leader, Team B, line 32).

Managing a multicultural team is a challenge for the management despite the development of a unified storage culture. At the same time, this process is an important milestone, as it initiates the induced cultural change. It “has now settled down a little bit, a year and a half or so. In the meantime, everyone has his or her own
areas under control. You can already see an increase in quality and efficiency” (team leader, Team B, line 28). To further consolidate these goals, the development of intercultural competence is desirable. Digitalized structures support this development through simplification by unification of e.g. communication channels. At this point it is also important to note that the introduction and integration into new digitalized structures requires adapted and participative management behavior in order to integrate all employees into the storage culture. Furthermore, important aspects of management and control are explaining, understanding and the change of perspective of the employees. The individual support and leadership of individual employees is particularly important in view of the multicultural workforce and the associated differences in understanding leadership, hierarchies and security regulations; this is how the change towards a storage culture is processed. It must be taken into account that this process with the goal of a uniform storage culture is a time-consuming process. The actors with their diverse cultures contribute to the storage culture or influence it. The multicultural teams are also an opportunity to gain knowledge. It tries to feed in the advantages from each culture. Two possibilities result from the investment in the employees: selection of members or adaptation and integration.

Storage Culture

During the selection process, employees are either not hired, dismissed or the issue shifts to another area: For example, in the sales area, multiculturalism counts as a company strength, as customers can be served in their native language. However, the context of the storage facility and thus the storage culture is left behind—accordingly, other orientation systems take effect. The adaptation and integration of employees leads to the adoption of the orientation and rule system applicable in the storage culture. This ideal of the storage culture, which is in development and already partially in place, bases on a strong team orientation of the team members and harmonious cooperation. This results in an orderly process flow that facilitates cooperation. In this regard, these processes and the striving to achieve goals represent a functional component. The need for harmony and the great responsibility of the individual (if the ideas of the storage culture are effective), among other things, for the maintenance of the storage culture, connect the functional component with the social component and the figurations of the established and outsiders that arise here. Accordingly, the concept of storage culture as a system of orientation is only permanent in the storage facility. As soon as the employees leave the storage, the prevailing culture no longer is an orientation system. This circumstance results from the strict permeability of the model and the lack of investment in staff outside the storage facility. Thus, when leaving the storage facility, not all the premises necessary for the existence of the storage culture are fulfilled. Consequently, several requirements have to be met to give validity to the storage culture as a socially constructed, complex and dynamic orientation system: On the one hand, the actors are in the working context and the frame of reference of the locality—the storage—is fulfilled. On the other hand, there is a necessary investment in the employees in form of leadership and control. An established storage culture can certainly contribute to the goals of harmonious cooperation, team stability, orderly process flow, and thus to
functional cooperation. “But I think harmony goes beyond cultures, that’s true, isn’t it?” (employee, Team C, line 88).

**Self and Third-Party Construction**

The *established outsider figuration* by self- and third-party construction. The team leaders represent *the established* and the team members *the outsiders*. The individual attributing the corresponding characteristics to himself, defines the self-construction whereas the external construction contains the characteristics that attributes to the individual or the team by others. These constructions have a decisive influence on the figuration: If, for example, a self-construction is strong enough to resist the image of the others for a certain period, it is possible that it will be adapted as an image of the others by the other actors and change accordingly. There is also the possibility that the self-image bends to the image of the other. The discrepancy between self-construction and external construction results in a lack of team stability, a high workload and uncertainty. If the self-image and the image of the other were harmonious, this would possibly result in greater team stability and a lower workload. In this figuration, however, a special feature constitutes: There is not only a management level and a worker level, but also an intermediate level on which there are employees with such a strong positive self-image that they see themselves in an unofficial leadership role. The employees and, to a limited extent, even the management bodies accept this role. This intermediate level reflects that of the unofficially established or outsiders. Thus, the permeability of the process steps and the dynamic flow of power are reflected here. *The outsiders* can become established; conversely, *the established* can fall into the role of outsiders. The latter ends, however, as in the observed case studies, in leaving the company. The hierarchical structures as well as the monitoring and control of the employees strongly influence the relationship networks. The hierarchical structure becomes evident here. Only the established ones monitor and control *the outsiders*. Thus, *the established* have the possibility to influence *the outsiders*, but *the outsiders* do not have the possibility to supervise the established. Not least because of this fact, the existing power gap in the figuration becomes evident. This in turn affects cooperation through the created hierarchical structures. The figuration is thus dependent on the cooperation, but at the same time, the cooperation influences the figuration. Regarding the identified figuration, the permeability becomes clear at this point: There is the possibility of a transition between outsiders and the established, the result of which is a group of unofficially established people. In addition, there is also permeability in the other direction—from the established group to *the outsiders*—but this usually leads to leaving the company and thus joining the group of former members (Fig. 2).

Through the interaction of all core categories, a form of *storage culture* emerges; it influences the cooperation in organizational teams and contributes to a unification of the differences. It is important, however, that despite—or precisely because of—the *storage culture* (or the goal of the *storage culture*), the multicultural workforce requires attentive and individual leadership. The storage facility is therefore an ideal type, which is predominantly found in the observed company, with few exceptions.
An elementary function is assigned to the digitalized structures in the company. For example, the employees are enabled to carry out self-control by the scanners used. “I first look at something in the computer, in the scanner or in the computer, what I should do and more work. And then I do” (employee, Team A, line 14). The instructions and work orders are uniformly formulated—communication with third parties is not necessary. If an employee takes a wrong article from the shelf, the scanner will provide an auditory warning and the digital system blocks further processing of the process. At this point, the extent to which the digitalized structures contribute to the unification of differences becomes apparent.

7 Discussion

Prior to reflecting and summarizing the research process in the following section, the results of the present study need to be discussed. The central concerns of the research were pointing out the figurations that arise in the course of cooperation in digitalized work contexts in organizational teams and in clarifying the question of whether culture exerts an influence on team cooperation and if so to what extent.

Attempting to transfer the established outsider figuration to the context of the organization and to shed light on cooperation in multicultural teams yielded interesting results, although these differ in part from those by Elias and Scotson [9]. In summary, the characteristics of the determinants of an established outsider figuration reveal a model based on the premise of two interdependent groups with a power imbalance. The trigger can be a competitive situation, which expresses, for example,
in uncertainty or in the fear that one’s own social status is at risk. This results in the rejection of the outsiders by the established. The group of the established has the possibility to build up a strong group cohesion, while the outsiders do not develop it:

Its greater cohesion enables such a group to reserve social positions with a high power potential of a different type for its members, thus in turn reinforcing its cohesion, and to exclude from them members of other groups which is essentially what one means when one speaks of an established outsider figuration [9, p. 19].

Transferred to the figuration compiled in the course of the present research, the established outsider figuration appears—albeit in a special form—between the team leaders (established) and the team members (outsiders). The cohesion in the group of team leaders is higher than in the group of team members, not least because of the high fluctuation in the group of team members. The team members do not have the possibility to build up a firm relationship among each other due to the constant change in the team. At the same time, the team leaders sometimes prevent personal contact. Moreover, the established outsider figuration differs from that by Elias and Scotson [9]. Here an intermediate dimension of the unofficially established or outsiders becomes apparent. Although officially they belong to the respective group, they are at the transition to the opposite group (Fig. 2). The permeability of the process, which runs through the entire model, is also visible here.

In addition to these results, the storage culture is a phenomenon that is occasionally not necessarily described as a desirable one. In theory, the aim is to create an intercultural encounter which is not forcing the foreign culture into the own orientation system. However, it seems to make sense to establish a uniform storage culture in the observed company. In view of the results of the study and the research field, it is also noticeable that even though the challenges of intercultural cooperation addressed in the theory do exist, the synergies do not inevitably become effective in this case study. Thus, an individual management geared to the multicultural workforce seems to be inevitable, although the solution is to adapt and integrate into the uniform storage culture. Previous research primarily deals with the cooperation of multicultural teams in the field of white-collar workers. The results obtained in this respect cannot be confirmed in the present research. Rather, the different cultures play a subordinate role during work in the storage facility: “You have a job to do, it has to be done, over! Finished! You don’t need any, I don’t know, the Yank can do it better, the Syrian can do it better, you don’t have that in the storage facility. Everyone has to do his work” (team leader, Team B, line 77). Also, considering the introductory statement of Confucius, the uniform habits of storage work in the digitalized work contexts lead to a unification of the differences.
8 Conclusion and Outlook

The research-guiding question of the formation of figurations in digitalized work contexts in organizational teams and the influence of culture on cooperation was answered based on the model of a unified storage culture derived from the empirical data. During this process, an established outsider figuration, which the team leaders and the team members define, crystallizes. The leadership and control of multicultural teams creates different challenges, but as an induced cultural change it ideally leads to a unified storage culture. Digitalized structures in the company, which simplify the unification of the differences, support this development.

Finally, the basic assumptions of figuration sociology are reflected in the research process. The established outsider figuration results from the interplay of interdependent relationships between team leaders and team members. In addition, the relationships and dependencies between them drive the transformation from foreign cultures to storage culture forward. Despite the relatively short research period, the long-term nature of the social processes became clear, and the model and its concepts were observed in their ‘becoming’. The establishment of the storage culture was not an intentionally planned process, and it was also not an aimless one. Likewise, the interdependence and relative autonomy of the actors are expressed in the figuration described, in the storage culture and its effects; consequently, they are free in their actions to a limited extent and are only interwoven with each other through figurations.

The strengths of the research work lie in the precisely defined research process, through which traceability is guaranteed. In addition, a model based on the empirical data was developed, which provides initial starting points to shed light on aspects surrounding the conception of a storage culture in the local company and the formation of figurations in this context. A certainly relevant limitation of the present study is the survey and evaluation procedure of the grounded theory methodology. Although this procedure has advantages that have been described many times, these should be critically reflected, especially regarding possible losses of data material during the reduction by forming categories. A further limiting aspect in this context is the question of repeatability, which is indispensable in quantitative research [36]. Although the results could be tested for causality, it should be noted that for social phenomena an exact repeatability of the study with identical results is not possible. In view of the processual nature of social reality, it is not possible to create identical initial conditions for the renewed study [36].

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the results of this research work originate from a situation-related case study and the model does not claim to be universally transferable. Nevertheless, the assumptions provide an adequate framework for deriving further research questions. For example, research into team-building processes, or the integration of diversity management in order to implement the induced cultural change in a more targeted and effective manner would be relevant and current topics for subsequent research questions. Additionally, the question of the influence of other areas of the company on the storage culture arises. Moreover, there is the
possibility to test the research for its transferability by trying to apply it to other companies. For example, in terms of digitalization, the figuration between white and blue-collar workers would be interesting. Looking at the current situation (COVID-19 Pandemic), it becomes obvious that especially blue-collar workers are not benefiting from digitalization to the full extent. This is particularly evident in the (pandemic prevention) measures for working in home offices see for further information Pauly and Holdampf-Wendel [29]. The employees must work on site.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that—not least because of the globalization and digitalization—there are hardly any alternatives to multicultural teams in organizations. Therefore, the question is not whether not whether these are in use, but how they deal and the challenges they pose can be dealt with. Targeted guidance and support through digitalization play a central role in the researched company in order to achieve that the differences in the unified storage culture play a subordinate role. This chapter provides initial approaches and impulses for thinking in order to shed light on this topic and to derive possible recommendations for action in entrepreneurial practice.

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