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# Differentiating *agents*, differentiated *patients*: the production of subjects and knowledge(s) in theorizing differentiation in education

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## ABSTRACT

Educational theorizing makes use of various tools and perspectives to understand how differentiation processes in education have emerged as responses to socio-historical developments. Drawing on a systematic literature review, this article finds that educational research has framed these responses in five different ways: as structural-functional response; communicative response; cultural-historical response; hegemonic response; and as a response to capability development. Scrutinizing these scholarly understandings of differentiation from a meta-theoretical perspective, the article investigates, firstly, the kinds of knowledge generated within each approach; secondly, how researchers and researched subjects—differentiating agents and differentiated patients—are positioned relative to one another; and thirdly, how these approaches contribute to thinking about inclusion and exclusion in education. Drawing on insights from the author’s fieldwork in multi-ethnic Southwest China, each of these five theoretical conceptualizations are interrogated with respect to their potential to accommodate conceptions of individual or collective agency.

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## Introduction

*Differentiation* is an ambiguous term in education. On the one hand, it is associated with pedagogical and didactic coping strategies when confronted with diverse classrooms and mixed-ability environments (cf. e. g. Tomlinson, 2010). Differentiation, in this strand of research, is an expected ingredient in the educator’s set of skills and competences. As a pedagogical-didactic technique, differentiation is a natural consequence of school systems that seek to follow an inclusive, rather than segregating, approach to education. It is usually referred to as ‘curriculum differentiation’, and is anchored in different perspectives on human-cum-social development: the genetic and bio-psychological, the cultural-narrative, and the sociological perspectives (cf. Terwel, 2005; see also the scoping review by Graham et al., 2021).

On the other hand, *differentiation* is also an analytical concept used to describe and understand educational processes across time and space, mostly of a systemic nature, but with potentially important implications for particular groups and individuals. This understanding is rooted in the assumption that education, and in particular institutionalized forms of schooling, exert the double

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function of ‘incorporation’ and ‘differentiation’ (cf. Stoler & Cooper, 1997). Since the emergence of mass schooling and compulsory education, schooling has been bridging various divides. It literally brings together, within the physical surroundings of the classroom, for example, people who may never meet outside the school. However, these processes of incorporation work side by side with forms of differentiation that are direct or indirect reactions to incorporative processes: schools for the poor and the rich; for the privileged and the deprived; schools that select by ability (however defined) and/or by curricular specialization; schools catering to, or excluding, certain genders, ethnic and religious groups; and so on. Even the most inclusive education systems, where the great majority of children are mainstreamed into one school type, have a red line on the question of who can be educated at a ‘normal’ school (for example, with respect to children facing severe developmental challenges). Ideas and norms surrounding educability, as shown by Mikhaylova and Pettersson (2023) in this special issue, are often intertwined with political developments and changes over time (cf. also Hestholm & Jobst, 2020).

Against the background of the theme of this special issue—differentiation processes in education—this article is interested in this second strand of studies: the sociologically and historically oriented research into differentiation that addresses the question of how differentiation, as a social process, can be explained and theorized, and how these processes affect, or are affected by, education. Based on an extensive literature review, five different perspectives on differentiation have been identified. These perspectives can also be considered ‘responses’ – that is, ways of framing *differentiation* as a response to observed developments: thus, differentiation as (i) a structural-functional response; (ii) a communicative response; (iii) a cultural-historical response; (iv) a hegemonic response; and (v) a response to capability development. This article explores the kind of knowledge that is generated within each of these conceptualizations of *differentiation*; how and where researchers and researched subjects—the differentiating *agents* and the differentiated *patients* – are positioned; and what this means for conceptions of agency. Relating these epistemological questions back to empirical problems, I will explore the ways in which each of the five conceptualizations contribute to thinking about inclusion and exclusion in education.

While differentiation as an explanatory concept for analysing social-historical processes has occupied a small but interesting niche in educational research (cf. e. g. Emmerich & Hormel, 2021; Foster, 1977; Vanderstraeten, 2004), there is, to date, no systematic meta-theoretical review of different conceptualizations of differentiation as a social process in education.<sup>1</sup> By ‘meta-theoretical’, I mean works that scrutinize the assumptions that underlie the theories in question, bringing to the table also epistemological questions. In the words of Bates (2005, p. 2): ‘Metatheory can be seen as the philosophy behind the theory, the fundamental set of ideas about how phenomena of interest in a particular field should be thought about and researched’.

This article is hence both a *meta-theoretical review* of differentiation in education, and a *conceptual contribution* to the discussion of *differentiation* in education. For a systematic overview of the research produced on education and differentiation, I conducted a literature search in the relevant databases<sup>2</sup> and categorized the search results inductively, guided by the question of how differentiation, as a social process interacting with education, is conceptualized in each publication.

For the purpose of illustration, this article draws on observations from my fieldwork on ethnic minority education (see e. g. Schulte, 2019), conducted between 2017 and 2019 in rural and impoverished areas of Sichuan and Guizhou provinces in Southwestern China: regions that are characterized by multiple intersections of deprivation. In my field sites, economic poverty intersects with disadvantages arising from lack of (mainstream) cultural capital, geographical remoteness, as well as non-mainstream belongingness in terms of ethnic and local identity and religious belief. Such settings pose considerable challenges to a nationally defined education system with incorporative ambitions, and can therefore showcase how different ways to theorize differentiation result in diverging perspectives on inclusion and exclusion in education.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section will briefly clarify what a meta-theoretical discussion of approaches towards differentiation in education entails, and why it is important to

connect these approaches to issues of knowledge production and agency. In the section that follows, I will introduce the cases of three teachers in communities in Southwestern China. While these teachers are real persons with individual biographies, knowledges, and expectations, they can nonetheless be considered typical of many teachers in rural, multi-ethnic China. Thereafter, I will elaborate on five different ways to conceptualize *differentiation* in education, and link these to the cases of the three teachers.

### **Differentiation in education: researching *agents* and researched *patients***

As noted above, no systematic review has been done of how ways of theorizing about differentiation in education are rooted in various epistemological traditions, and thereby grounded in different assumptions about the positioning of the researcher and the researched. This is somewhat surprising since understandings of differentiation are not just abstract ponderings but relate to core issues in education: processes of differentiation impact on people's socialization into (or away from) certain knowledge traditions, on their experiences of inclusion and belongingness (or exclusion and alienation), and generally on their life chances and dreams of a 'good life'. It should therefore be of paramount importance to know how different research perspectives frame these existential processes differently. Existing research that does take a meta-theoretical perspective often focuses on specific aspects, such as the relationships between curriculum differentiation/work and knowledge production/differentiation (e. g. Shay, 2013, on higher education; Hopmann, 1999; Terwel, 2005, on the school curriculum); the differentiation of academic disciplines and knowledge production (e. g. Schriewer & Keiner, 1992); or the world-class university movement and role differentiation of universities (e. g. Lo, 2011).

Discussing theoretical perspectives on differentiation in education at a meta-theoretical level touches upon different conceptions of what empirical reality is, as well as on questions of how this reality is structured, and what the positions and roles of researchers are in these conceptions. This has implications for how we understand educational processes and—with reference to the focus of this special issue and of this article specifically—how we can make sense of differentiation in education. Most often, meta-theoretical discussions are reduced to an alleged antagonism between the empiricist approach (often premised on neo-positivist reasoning) and what we can broadly summarize as the interpretivist approach (including, e.g. phenomenological and social constructivist perspectives)—what Pring (2004) characterizes as the scientific versus the humanistic paradigm. This dichotomy has generated substantial critique, as it leads researchers to fall 'into a philosophical trap [...] the ancient dualism between mind and body, between the publicly accessible and the privately privileged' (Pring, 2004, p. 33). This article is not premised on a particular standpoint within the philosophy of science—such as constructivist or neo-positivist—but rather is interested in going beyond such dualisms to understand how certain research perspectives make certain ideas and practices visible, while potentially obscuring others.

Jackson's practical typology of philosophical 'core wagers' (Jackson, 2011, p. 32) in scientific research can prove useful here, as it helps illuminate how the choice of perspective is also a decision to construct the researcher and the researched in particular ways:

Wagers constitute worlds, in that they quite literally set the stage for the kinds of empirical and theoretical puzzles and challenges that a scholar takes to be meaningful and important [...]. At a minimum, a wager locates and specifies three things: the researcher, the world to be researched, and the character of the relationship between them. (Jackson, 2011, p. 34)

The article follows this 'minimum' guidance from Jackson's epistemological reflections, which add depth to the discussion of concepts like *differentiation*. Taking into consideration Jackson's three entities—the researcher, the researched, and the relationship between them—such discussion may entail investigations into how, firstly, concepts of differentiation are employed in the education system, at school, or in the classroom; secondly, how we as researchers, who are part of distinct

research traditions, paradigms, and thereby normative conceptions of how children should learn and teachers should teach construct these concepts and, based on these constructions, are able to perceive and analyse their uses in the classroom; and, thirdly, how our research traditions and preconceptions forge particular relationships between ourselves and the educators/educated we observe.

Looking at educational research on differentiation from a meta-theoretical perspective is not simply an intellectual game. It allows us to question our own ways of doing research by taking a step back and scrutinizing how the worlds (and truths) of researchers and the researched are constructed. In most research traditions, these processes evolve along one-way directions of reasoning.<sup>3</sup> Invariably, researchers, or *differentiating agents*, are agentic in deciding on the 'adequate' angle for investigating processes of differentiation—'adequate' in the sense of being consistent with their research tradition/paradigm—while the researched, or *differentiated patients*, play the passive role of being made into particular kinds of actors. As Schütz has put it somewhat matter-of-factly:

... these models of actors are not human beings living within their biographical situation in the social world of everyday life. Strictly speaking, they do not have any biography or any history; and the situation into which they are placed is not a situation defined by them but defined by their creator, the social scientist. He [sic!] has created these puppets or homunculi to manipulate them for his purpose. [...] The homunculus was not born, he does not grow up, and he will not die. [...] He is not free in the sense that his acting could transgress the limits his creator, the social scientist, has predetermined. [...] He cannot choose, except among the alternatives the social scientist has put before him as standing to his choice. (Schütz, 1953, p. 32)

The following section will briefly introduce the persons behind my cases, and then turn to the question of what options these homunculi have, and what agency they can develop, depending on the research perspective that is chosen to investigate processes of differentiation.

### The cases: Delek, Gendun, and Wang

Teachers Delek and Gendun will be used as illustrative examples for the first three perspectives and teacher Wang for the last two.<sup>4</sup> Delek and Gendun are two elderly female teachers of the Tibetan language. They have been working at a secondary school in a Tibetan minority area in Sichuan province for several decades, and are themselves ethnically Tibetan. Delek and Gendun entered the field in the 1980s, a time when there was a severe lack of teachers, particularly in rural areas. As a consequence, not only were private (so-called *minban*) schools tolerated to compensate for the lack of local public schools (see Schulte, 2018), the minimum requirements for becoming a public school teacher were less rigorous than in urban and more affluent regions. Delek and Gendun were able to work as secondary school teachers even though they had themselves only completed secondary school, and had not undergone teacher training at the tertiary level. In present-day China, they are considered underqualified. To comply with current requirements, and in line with a major e-learning initiative in Sichuan, Delek and Gendun are required to undergo regular online teacher training, as well as to take exams to complete this training, to be allowed to continue working as teachers.

At the time of our school visits, Delek and Gendun were busy teaching and taking training courses to obtain their missing qualifications. They expressed concern regarding the training programme, as they found it rather divorced from the educational reality at their school, and too demanding of them as teachers with little formal education and with rural backgrounds. They were struggling together to make it through the programme, and considered it a collective rather than individual task. Delek and Gendun said that they did not know what would happen if they were to fail the final exams; scenarios ranged from no consequences at all, to being downgraded on the salary scale, to losing their jobs.

Teacher Wang is a middle-aged, male maths teacher in X town, a small town in Guizhou province. Guizhou is home to several officially recognized ethnic minorities. Unlike the Tibetan region of Sichuan, where most schools have Tibetan-only student populations, schools in Guizhou often host

multi-ethnic student communities, meaning that most students use standard Chinese (*Putonghua*) to communicate, rather than their respective minority languages. Teacher Wang is categorized as belonging to the Shui ethnicity. In line with recent attempts to revive ethnic minority culture—such as the ancient Shui writing system—Wang's school is expected to endorse the transmission of Shui cultural heritage, in addition to teaching the official curriculum which is mainly dominated by the Han majority and is decisive for China's high-stakes examination system. Wang takes part in these activities, but emphasizes their performative character. When talking about how he feels about his own identity, he says that he feels like an 'X-town person, that's my identity'. Even though Wang does not bear a grudge about being labelled Shui, he does not think that this label adequately captures his identity and feeling of belonging.

### Five different ways of conceptualizing *differentiation* in education

While by no means exhaustive, the five different conceptualizations discussed below guide much of what has been written about differentiation in educational research. The following is not to be read as a chronological account, but is arranged in relation to how researcher and researched are positioned to one another. With respect to questions of agency (including that of the three teachers presented above), the last three approaches are more apt to adequately address actors' agency, with the last two specifically bringing in a normatively based argumentation and a perspective of social justice.

#### *Differentiation as a structural-functional response*

This first perspective on differentiation is based on the fundamental assumption that different problems require different solutions. Societies and organizations differentiate in order to tackle problems efficiently and effectively, and social actors need to adapt to these differentiations by assuming appropriate roles. A classic reference of this structural-functionalist reasoning is Parsons, who posits that classrooms fulfil the function of, on the one hand, socializing youth into societal norms; and on the other, of producing graduates who can adopt roles that fit an increasingly differentiated (modern or modernizing) society (Parsons, 1959). Parsons was clearly inspired by the works of Durkheim, who detected in social systems general (and generalizable) mechanisms similar to those discovered (or conjectured) in the natural sciences. Durkheim paved the way for a structural-functionalist perspective with regard both to socialization through his work on moral education (Durkheim, 1902–1903), and to systemic societal developments and the roles of social actors within them. The latter is evident, for example, in Durkheim's distinction between different types of societal solidarity (Durkheim, 1893): While the 'mechanical' type, according to Durkheim, is characteristic of 'traditional' societies<sup>5</sup> based on kinship ties and low differentiation of roles, the 'organic' type is assigned to 'modern', highly differentiated, societies which require from social actors elaborate role-adaptation processes.

Structural-functionalist approaches have been criticized for their teleological character, stressing the inevitability of systemic processes and sharing with modernization theory a rather one-sided, Western-centric view of modern society and the roles to be assumed therein. Such approaches have often been accompanied by ideas of social-educational engineering, as the following statement by Husén (1989, pp. 351–2) demonstrates: 'Pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, universities and adult education centres are expected to shoulder the task of making young people competent to live in a modern society or in a society moving towards modernization. The more complex and differentiated the institutionalized system of education, the more rational planning has to go into it.' Structural functionalism has also been faulted for poorly explaining change and social contradiction, as Welch (1985, p. 16) so aptly formulates in his critique:

The functionalist system as used in Parsons and in many modernisation theorists was an integrative healing force which overtly and covertly stabilised society and sedated social conflict. [...] Education [...] thus tended to be construed and judged solely in terms of its ability to serve the assumed technical wants of the larger system [...] Education, indeed, was principally important as a vehicle for transmission of values to smaller units of the system such as schools or 'actors', rather than a source for change.

While outright structural functionalism no longer dominates educational research and is considered outdated (Ballantine et al., 2018), its basic premises still underlie much thinking and writing and, perhaps even more so, public debates about education. For example, discussions of the interaction between education as human capital, employability, and the labour market often draw on functionalist arguments by relating educational processes and structures to (alleged or expected) social functions of society (cf. Spring, 2015). Historical-functionalist approaches have been used to investigate the emergence of disciplines in higher education (Muller, 2009) or even make strategic predictions about the effects of differentiation (Muller, 2015). On a less controversial note, structuralist-functionalist thinking has contributed to the literature on professionalization through differentiation (cf. Saks, 2016).

Returning to the meta-theoretical questions outlined earlier, I now turn to the question of where and how researchers and researched are positioned in structural-functionalist approaches, and what their critical potential is with regard to agency, particularly with respect to the first two cases, of teachers Delek and Gendun, introduced in the preceding section. Notably, the functionalist perspective produces the researcher as a disengaged observer who carefully investigates seemingly 'natural' and inevitable processes: how various entities in a system are related to one another; how these relations produce differences; and how these differences require different roles for actors to assume. The researched world, in turn, consists of actors who need to react (and adjust) depending on where they are located in the differentiating system, and to cope with the roles available to them. Any expertise other than that 'required' by the system—such as, for example, indigenous expertise running counter to the logic of (normatively elevated) differentiation processes—becomes largely invisible in this approach, or is simply subsumed into the 'traditional', and is hence to be modernized and replaced.

Frequent (and mostly justified) associations of structural functional approaches with modernist and deterministic ideologies make it difficult to identify any more critical potential. However, some aspects may be worth following up through a structural-functionalist lens. Firstly, the rationality, efficiency, and effectiveness of the respective 'problem solutions' can be assessed, if only within the functionalist paradigm. These may include questions like whether the chosen solutions are consistent with the 'problems' identified and, if not, whether these solutions can be regarded as 'failures' within the world of the researched, or if inconsistencies are due to the researcher's own inadequate observations of the problem context (see e. g. Hordern, 2016). Secondly, structural-functionalist approaches may contribute to comparative studies, through investigating how similar (or different) processes of differentiation have generated different problem solutions and different roles. Finally, a structural-functionalist approach may look into hidden or problematic problem solutions, for example by triangulating observed processes of differentiation with actors' experiences or statistical data (e. g. on social mobility).

With regard to Delek and Gendun, a structural-functional approach may help analyse the system's rationality in its initiatives to upgrade underqualified teachers. This may include questions such as: how are programmes of teacher upgrading consistent with what has been observed as differentiation and professionalization processes in the education system? How feasible are these programmes with regard to available resources and expertise? To what extent are solutions systemic across the entire system, or are they parts of patchwork ad-hoc strategies? What are the barriers for social actors to assume modified roles in an increasingly differentiated system?

As these questions show, a structural-functional approach does not necessarily have to be affirmative of the observed solutions, as is suggested in Welch's critique above, though there certainly has been a historical tendency towards affirmation. Nevertheless, some aspects that are

essential to Delek and Gendun cannot be captured by a structural-functionalist approach. For example, nuances of inclusion—so important for these individuals and generally in educational settings—can be grasped only inadequately. Delek and Gendun experience what Kabeer has called ‘adverse incorporation or problematic inclusion’ (Kabeer, 2000, p. 87): Even though they are employed as teachers, it is on uncertain terms, with constant signals that their expertise may not be sufficient. They lack ‘recognition of difference’ (Fraser, 1998, p. 1), in a moral justice sense of ‘parity of participation’ (ibid., p. 5; emphasis in the original). This lack of recognition concerns both their professional roles as experienced teachers and their cultural identities as rural Tibetans. Lastly, while a structural-functionalist perspective helps to illuminate the system’s rationality, it has no interest in the actors’ individual rationalities, that is, their ways of making sense of stability and change, and the emotions connected to this, such as expectations, fears, pride, and humiliation.

### ***Differentiation as a communicative response***

Similar to the structural-functionalist approach, the conceptualization of differentiation as a communicative response has as its primary reference the (social, educational, etc.) system. Moreover, social systems—again, in parallel with Durkheim’s ideas outlined above—are modelled on biological systems. The basic assumption in what I call the ‘communicative approach’<sup>6</sup> originates from Luhmann’s system-theoretical perspective (for an overview, see Vanderstraeten, 2003): systems communicate continuously, both intra-systemically and with other systems, and differentiate by developing an intra-system language and an inter-system form of communication. For the education system, several languages of communication have been developed in the course of these differentiation processes: a pedagogic language, an organizational/administrative language, a language of subject knowledge, a legal language (cf. Bergh & Forsberg, 2023, on the juridification of the education sector) etc. Communication through these languages is constantly calibrated through instruments such as teacher training, practitioner research, teacher magazines, school conferences, and so on.

Unlike the classical structural-functionalist approach, in the Luhmannian perspective education is less about individual development or moral socialization than about integrating persons into the communication system. Education thus becomes a basis for communicative transactions, in which each part knows about the meaning and the value of the transaction, and hence what to expect. Tellingly, Luhmann uses the German term *Erziehung* (upbringing) rather than *Bildung* (the term that is conventionally used as an equivalent to English ‘education’), to stress the communicative aspect of education. Consequently, he offers what he calls a ‘quasi tautological’<sup>7</sup> definition of education (*Erziehung*): ‘Education is all communication that is realized, during interaction, with the intention of educating’ (Luhmann, 2017, p. 54). Beyond constituting itself through communicating, education has no inbuilt, overarching purpose (such as pedagogical/educational or moral objectives) or content (such as curricular aspects); these emerge from the formation of education as a communication system. Simply put, education becomes education through differentiation in terms of:

task-related education and training, salaries, independence from the social status of students, buildings, instructional material etc. [...] Translated into system-theoretical terminology, educational intention is a formula of autonomy by which a surplus of communication possibilities could be legitimized. Therefore, it is then, and only then, that the education system needs self-discipline: self-organization, methods, and professional self-conscience of educators. (Luhmann, 2017, p. 62)

Researchers are, in this perspective, observers of emergent forms and systems of communication and communicative transactions within and across systems, as well as of disruptions occurring in these transactions. Contrary to a Durkheimian approach, which is interested in generalization and thus prospective analysis, this research perspective is mainly retrospective: it can trace the historical



emergence of (for example) education systems and their differentiations, but has little ambition to anticipate the emergence of such systems.

Regarding the researched world, Luhmann acknowledges—like Schütz cited earlier in this article—the artificial, constructed nature of social actors, and therefore distinguishes real, empirical ‘human beings’ (German: *Menschen*) from ‘persons’ whose task it is to realize a social communication system (as identified by the researcher). Instead of a role bearer as in the functional perspective, Luhmann’s *person* constitutes a ‘traffic sign of social communication’ (Luhmann, 2017, p. 39) and hence lacks genuine individual motivation. This latter, according to Luhmann (*ibid.*, p. 37), is:

not a cause, but a reason for taking action that can be presented [to others; B. S.]. Motives are generated in communication for the purpose of communication. Psychic concepts of motives are only reflexes of real or potential communication: One thinks about what one could say if one’s own behaviour were to be rendered a problem by others.

This means that social actors play both reactive and proactive roles. They react to possibilities of communication and adapt their own contributions accordingly; but they also become proactive by preparing for certain eventualities that may, in their eyes, arise during communication. This latter proactive agency is, however, strictly defined by the rules of the system. Actors are literally caught in the self-referentiality of their respective system: *persons* like teachers cannot act like soldiers, bankers, or priests, and they cannot speak a language other than that of the system (on agency/autonomy of teachers from a system-theoretical perspective, see also Schulte, 2023).

The communicative, system-theoretical approach has at times been blamed for a lack of critical engagement with human action: that because it lacks a normative perspective, and is proximate to models of biological systems, it takes no interest in human beings (*Menschen*) other than in their capacity of communication. Consequently, it leaves aside questions of power struggles or issues of moral justice, such as inequality, inequity, or feelings of exclusion. Inherently educational modes of exclusion—above all, selection processes—are explained, not as part of the pedagogical intention as such, or as the exertion of power, but as an unavoidable side-effect of educational communication (supported by the language of, e.g. quantification/grades, standards, comparability etc.), since only selection processes can signal the success or failure of education (cf. Luhmann, 2017).

Yet a communicative perspective may possess critical potential when considering questions such as: what is *not* part of the system’s language/communication, and what is being filtered out? Which actors become irrelevant (or relevant) in the respective communication system, for example, in processes of teacher training/accreditation or for defining the curriculum? When and for what reasons do processes of disruption happen, that is, when are systems forced to partially open themselves to input from other systems (such as, for example, in the economization, politicization, or juridification of education)? For Emmerich and Hormel (2021, p. 304), the communicative approach explains the production of inequalities through the education system, as ‘organisation-based inclusion/exclusion operations relate individuals and society by addressing persons as relevant or non-relevant for systems communication’ (see also Mangez & Vanden Broeck, 2021; Rapp et al., 2023). A communicative perspective could potentially even assume a meta-theoretical stance (just as this article does), by questioning the self-referentiality of the research process and its (in) capacity to include certain languages while excluding others.

What does a communicative perspective entail for Delek and Gendun? Firstly, it could be used to observe and analyse processes of increasing and decreasing relevance of certain *persons*, such as underqualified rural/ethnic minority teachers. While previous educational languages included those of rural teachers, the system’s continuous move towards professionalization, accreditation, and adjustment to global educational standards, has created a situation in which rural teachers are no longer offered a language. What Kabeer terms ‘problematic inclusion’ is thus, from a system-theoretical perspective, a side-effect of ‘successful’ educational modernization. Rather than being victims of intentional discrimination, Delek and Gendun find themselves in their current problematic situation because the system’s communicative calibration has shifted towards a language that they

do not share. Yet it is precisely these calibration processes that legitimize the education system as a (more or less) autonomous system.

As far as agency is concerned, the communicative perspective makes it hard for Delek and Gendun, as *persons*, to develop agency beyond the self-referentiality of the system they are part of. Due to this perspective's rather rigid orientation towards the system's communication and language(s), there is the risk of what might be called systematic pockets of irrelevance: blind spots of communication that are experienced by the system's human beings (*Menschen*), but are not captured in the experiences and actions of the system's *persons*. Thus, Delek and Gendun may be rendered 'irrelevant' in their system's logic of communication, while playing a highly relevant role in their community (which is not identical with the education system). In short, Delek and Gendun are only visible as *underqualified teachers* speaking a partially unintelligible language, but not as human beings who are relevant outside the system of formal schooling.

### ***Differentiation as a cultural-historical response***

Unlike the previous two approaches, this third perspective is not a unitary line of thought but subsumes an assembly of approaches that rest on the assumption that societies, including societal institutions such as education, and their coping strategies, develop along culturally and historically shaped trajectories. Differentiation processes are, in a sort of dialectic interaction, both outcomes of historically specific situations and developments, and factors impacting on the future paths of these developments. Education systems, as parts of larger society, are seen as reflecting and reproducing these developments and are thus both results and drivers of differentiation. Overall, research conducted from this perspective can be divided into studies focusing on *structural* continuities and changes (e. g. Nokkala & Diogo, 2020; Proteasa et al., 2017), and investigations into *discursive/ideational* constellations and shifts (e. g. Bennike, 2015; Lund, 2008), with some approaches attempting to combine these two orientations, as will be elaborated below.

The research into *structural* developments has been particularly influenced by historical institutionalism, which analyzes the configuration and differentiation of institutions and is devoted to explaining diverging (or similar) developments across time and space (cf. Thelen, 2003; see also Archer, 1996, on structural elaboration). While the general assumption is one of continuity and path dependence—meaning a path, once taken, cannot be reversed—an important aspect is related to critical junctures along that path and the productive role of crises as enabling certain decisions and actions and making other choices inconceivable and hence improbable. In differentiation processes, the emergence of, for example, new types of school ownership (as educational corporations or public-private partnerships; cf. Verger et al., 2016) or the differentiation of school types based on disability (cf. Biermann et al., 2020; Moser, 2023) create paths along which it is difficult to reverse direction. New laws and regulations, providers and clients with vested interests, norms and expectations, etc., solidify the choices made, and render reversal improbable or at least tedious.

While acknowledging structural changes, research into the *discursive* and *ideational* formations of education systems focuses on how certain ways of thinking about education have paved the way, and shaped the future paths, for educational theorizing, policy making, and practice. In this strand of research, differentiation transpires through ever more elaborated responses to trending ideas, myths, and narratives, such as the processes of professionalization and institutionalization following the 'educationalization of the world' (Tröhler, 2016), or policy responses to globally dominant ideas such as 'inclusive education' (Paulsrud, 2022). Many studies are informed, implicitly or explicitly, by a genealogical approach (cf. Foucault & Gordon, 1980) and trace how certain 'truths' and knowledges have become dominant while others are subjected or forgotten. The researcher thus morphs the seemingly 'natural' problems of the functional paradigm into *problem constructions* through cultural-historical contextualization, and investigates how differentiation provides legitimacy, stability, and materiality in light of these problem constructions (cf. Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; see; Tawell &

McCluskey, 2021, on how such an approach can be employed for the study of exclusion in education).

As mentioned above, some approaches have combined structural and discursive/ideational approaches. For example, Scott (2003) integrates an ideational dimension into his model of institutional pillars and carriers that, besides regulatory elements, also include normative (values, expectations, etc.) and cultural-cognitive (typifications, scripts, etc.) elements. Especially neo-institutionalist studies on education have brought 'culture' back into institutionalist reasoning, albeit with a one-sided focus on cultural convergence. In a neo-institutional reading, *differentiation* (e. g. of the curriculum or teacher training) evolves in similar ways around the world, as organizations and nation-states globally observe what others do (for an appraisal, see Schulte, 2012): While each system differentiates, it does so against the background of a homogenizing world. Scandinavian new institutionalism is something of an exception due to its attention towards variation, distinction, and 'translation' of globally circulating ideas (Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). Differentiation, in this strand of research, constitutes both structural differentiation (e. g. of organizations such as schools) and local variation vis-à-vis global developments. Not surprisingly, local processes of translation and appropriation are, structurally and discursively, even more prevalent in anthropologically oriented studies (e. g. Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Carney, 2009).

Researchers, in this third perspective, not only attend to continuity and change in structures and/or narratives, but also seek to dissect the processes they observe in order to identify the underlying drivers of differentiation, whether in the form of institutional scripts and routines, or through discursive constellations. *Differentiation* is here, and in contrast to the first two perspectives, no longer a natural and inevitable development, but a process driven by organizations, actors, and ideas. Genealogical reflections, in particular, involve a double gaze: they not only attend to the legitimization (or delegitimization) of 'problems' and 'solutions' through discourses and narratives in the empirical world, but, for the sake of consistency, they also need to critically engage with the activity of the researchers themselves. Or, to use Foucault's words addressing the wannabe scientist:

What types of knowledge do you want to disqualify in the very instant of your demand: 'Is it a science'? Which speaking, discoursing subjects – which subjects of experience and knowledge – do you then want to 'diminish' when you say: 'I who conduct this discourse am conducting a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist'? (Foucault & Gordon, 1980, p. 85)

This double gaze puts the researched world in a peculiar situation. On the one hand, the researched are (re-)arranged for the sake of producing research accounts of path dependencies and cultural narratives: actors 'speak' largely through the sources selected by the researcher. On the other hand, the researcher has the responsibility to seek paths that were not taken, and narratives that were not mainstreamed. Thus, the cultural-historical perspective, at least hypothetically, opens up to accounts that are close to those of the researched and opposed to the monopoly of Western-centric models of development.<sup>8</sup> More drastically, the dissection of structural and agentic processes may even result in the deconstruction of established (and possibly essentialized) groupings of actors—or *homunculi* in Schütz's term—as Archer has so succinctly formulated in her reflections on structure and agency:

... what I am criticising is the (implicit) notion that the 'group' remains fundamentally the same, that is, it refers to the same entity. [...] It supposes that just because we can use the label 'working class' over three centuries of structural changes in Britain, we are talking about the same 'group'. We are not, any more than this is historically the case for 'teachers' or 'doctors' after the elaboration of educational and health systems. Nominally one could still use the same words, 'teachers' and 'doctors', and practically some individuals made the transition [...] the group has changed profoundly, witness change in employer, accountability, activity and professionalisation, new vested interests, forms of organisation and values. In other words, as it reshapes structure, agency is ineluctably reshaping itself, in terms of organisation, combination and articulation, in terms of its powers and these in relation to other agents. (Archer, 1996, pp. 696–697, emphasis in the original)

These reflections speak directly to the experiences of Delek and Gendun. While labelled 'teachers', the structural and discursive changes to which they are exposed, and the

transition which they are forced to make, render them simultaneously teachers and non-teachers. Inclusion thus emerges as a problematic concept, particularly from a genealogical perspective as addressed above: it includes those who happen to be on the right side of what counts as (modern) science and authoritative knowledge. Discursive and organizational alliances make certain groups and ideas includable, or at least visible, while forcing others to undergo structural/discursive readjustments. *Differentiation*, to teachers like Delek and Gendun, implies the ideational and organizational construction of new labels and categories, by redrawing the boundaries between those to be included and those to be excluded. To parts of the researched world, differentiation constitutes organizational, cognitive, emotional, and cultural labour.

### ***Differentiation as a hegemonic response***

While power plays varying roles in much of the research conducted from the cultural-historical perspective, it is an explicit and central organizing element in this fourth perspective. The principal assumption is that systems/societies are the outcomes of illegitimately unequal power relations, where actors can be located—both in a material/structural and in a discursive sense—along a scale between the *controllers*, who benefit from unequal access to resources (however defined), and the *controlled*, who are affected negatively by lack of access. From this perspective, *differentiation* is, on the one hand, the tangible, oppressive, and often violent result of this unequal distribution of power; and on the other, the technologies of power to achieve this result. Education is considered a site of struggle, since it is an instrument of oppression as well as of empowerment (in the sense of Freire, 1970).

On a global scale, many studies build on Wallerstein's (1974) model of a hierarchically structured global system, which in the field of education (re-)produces various forms of injustice, such as unequally distributed knowledge production, brain drain, hegemonies of educational reform, etc (Ginsburg et al., 1990; Odugu, 2020; Shahjahan, 2016). On all scales, however, differentiation works through establishing and maintaining hegemonic relations, for example by hierarchically categorizing people/students, making spatial arrangements that privilege or marginalize, or defining knowledge hierarchies by designing curriculum and legitimate examination/assessment modes, etc (e. g. Apple, 2018; Bylund, 2023; Giroux, 2011; Knutsson, 2020; Vásquez-Burgos et al., 2020; Wu, 2012). In some works, such as those of Bernstein (1996), education, or rather pedagogy, assumes a wider role than that of (formal) schooling. In Bernstein's totally pedagogized society, all actors are part of pedagogic relations (such as state-citizen, doctor-patient, media-public), which in turn are characterized by various forms of symbolic control. Teachers play an ambivalent role in these research approaches. While to some they are reproducers of power (e. g. Detwyler, 2022), to others they are themselves targets of domination and silencing (cf. Priestley et al., 2013).

Here, the researcher's role is, on the one hand, to expose hegemonic power relations and reveal the agendas of those in power (see also the contribution by Robertson in this special issue); and on the other, it is often to assume the role of advocates (cf. Apple, 2023) and (typically of the critical tradition) spread their research 'in the hope that a politically savvy agent will take advantage of them in transformative ways' (Jackson, 2011, p. 111). Different from the detached scholar in the first two perspectives (and, to an extent, the third), researchers are deeply engaged with what they research, often showing complicity with vulnerable and marginalized groups and knowledge systems, and searching for ways to counteract differentiation as a deliberate social management technology of exclusion. This perspective shares with the previous one a problematizing view on inclusion, but moves further into the researched world by not just pointing to processes of uprooting (cultural, epistemological), but by actively working towards re-rooting disprivileged people and knowledge systems as, for example, in the project of decolonial education (e. g. Barongo-Muweke, 2016). This endeavour of de-/re-constructing epistemologies is not without friction, as Stein et al. (2020, p. 4) observe regarding their own roles and capacity for scholarly communication: 'Paradoxically, we need

to strategically use this grammar [of Western scientific discourse; B. S.] – at least in selected ways—in order for our critical efforts to be intelligible within dominant scholarly discourses and institutions’.

At first sight, people in the researched world seem to be in naturally agentic positions as they can participate in the search for knowledge, including for local or indigenous ‘expertise’ – this would be important for Delek and Gendun, for example. Additionally, they benefit from having their vulnerabilities recognized and oppressive mechanisms of power uncovered, and their ways of thinking and acting may even have lessons for those who are less vulnerable and marginalized. Potentially, therefore, alternative epistemologies can transform all. However, two types of dynamics bear the risk of constraining agency. Firstly, actor categories (such as Bernstein’s differentiation into regulators, repairers, reproducers, diffusers, recontextualizers, propagators, executors) impose, once again, hierarchically organized labels on the researched world, even if with the intention of exposing these hierarchies. Secondly, and more profoundly, extending the decolonial project to the non-colonized world may water down or distract from the original project, as Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 3) formulate in their critique:

... decolonization is not a metaphor. When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. [...] Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn’t have a synonym.

Differentiation, from this critical standpoint, turns into a vital antonym to (hegemonic) cultural and academic appropriation: into a strategy for survival.

These tensions can be illustrated by returning to teacher Wang. Wang can be seen to become empowered by moving the researcher’s perspective towards an emphasis on the standpoint of marginalized groups and privileging marginalized perspectives. As a teacher from a so-called ‘ethnic minority’, his ways of thinking and experiences of exclusion (or problematic inclusion) would be taken seriously. However, it is equally important to critically investigate how ‘identities’ are construed and valorized in the research process. This entails asking questions such as: how much agency does Wang possess over defining the label(s) applied to him? Is an outsider’s perspective on issues of identity and belonging even possible? How does the researcher mitigate the risk of essentializing identities, such as the identity of ethnic Shui? Does the research process implicate acts of searching for marginalized and authentic voices? What if people like Wang fall between labels, and thus cannot claim to represent the authentic voice of X or Y? Does this make him a less valuable source of knowledge in the research process? I turn now to the fifth and last perspective, which tries to answer some of these questions.

### ***Differentiation as a response to capability development***

The capability approach is not usually a perspective that comes to mind when thinking about differentiation. This is confirmed by the literature review: conceptualizations of *differentiation* from a capability perspective constitute the smallest sample of the total. However, I argue that this approach is just as much about differentiation as the four discussed previously. In fact, earlier works focusing on education in developing countries have done the groundwork for thinking in terms of *capabilities* when attempting to understand differentiation processes. For example, Foster (1977, p. 214) is highly critical of both the structural-functionalist perspective and what he calls the ‘conflict theory’ or neo-Marxian tradition (in this article subsumed under the ‘hegemonic response’), and blames both perspectives for an excessive focus on the market: ‘the functionalists stress the operation of the market with all its consequences for social differentiation while conflict theorists tend, in fact, to concentrate their efforts on market imperfections’. Instead, Foster draws on categories of meaningfulness, arguing, for example, that access to schools can be of highly varying

relevance depending on individuals' lives and environments. To adequately capture this dynamic interaction between educational options, opportunities, and benefits, he explicitly uses social *differentiation* instead of social *stratification*. Importantly, Foster's locally grounded, contextualized research moves marginalized communities and their aspirations to centre stage, challenging the paternalistic development paradigm that (at least implicitly) holds that local people are not capable of making their own choices. Such a sensitive approach towards local constraints, possibilities, and rationalities is particularly important with regard to research on the marginalized communities in the Global South, and, as such, is highly compatible with the underpinnings of the capability approach, as Matsumoto (2018) has also shown for marginalized youths in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

Originating in a different paradigm—namely, phenomenological research related to Simmel's (1907, p. 490) notion of 'desirable lifestyles' and the importance of personal choice in light of what Simmel terms the 'increasing objectivation of the life world' – Reich and Tippelt (2005) have also pushed for a broader understanding of the relationship between social class and education, and empirically mapped understandings of education with corresponding choices of lifestyles.

Both Reich's and Tippelt's and Foster's approaches can be said to share Sen's (2003, p. 44) definition of capability, as reflecting 'a person's freedom to choose between different ways of living'. This definition becomes much more complex as the concepts of 'freedom' and 'choice' are subjected to further scrutiny. Different from the previously discussed perspectives, the capability approach focuses on the (im)possibilities of individual 'free choice': choices independent from surrounding factors are considered essentially impossible, as each individual is both *informed* and *deformed* by the community/society they live in. Especially the process of *deformation* warrants attention on the part of the researcher, who needs to take into account 'the many ways in which habit, fear, low expectations, and unjust background conditions deform people's choices and even their wishes for their own lives' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 114).

This insight is essential, as it basically rules out any approach that is solely based on people's subjective experiences and desires. Against this background, capability development means, firstly, the careful calibration of subjectively experienced needs and objectively identifiable conditions (or between agency and structure); secondly, 'awareness work' regarding available and desirable options, and strategies to attain these options; and based on this, thirdly, an identification of 'functionings' that are relevant to people, i.e. individuals' expectations and desires around work, rest, being literate, being healthy, being part of the community, being respected, etc. Simply put, if a child is presented as 'wanting' to be abused, we need to look into the deforming conditions that gave rise to this 'want', raise awareness regarding this deformation, and devise strategies against it, with the aim of achieving, together with the child, a situation in which their functionings—being loved and heard, being protected, being playful, etc. – are restored.

The capability perspective is obviously a normative approach (see Powell & McGrath, 2014). Its principal assumption is that societies develop based on how people are able to develop their capabilities and thereby expand (or diminish) existing spaces for agency. Education is to not only convey knowledge, but also transform this knowledge into functionings, via formal schooling and beyond. Since functionings can be both elementary (such as having enough to eat) and complex (i.e. attuned to individual needs and desires), this normative expectation has enormous effects on what kinds of knowledge and knowledge transmission are legitimate and useful.

Such a perspective has interesting implications for processes of differentiation. If we consider the emergence of different functionings—in whose identification both researched and researchers are actively involved—as *differentiation*, it means that differentiation can move in various directions, and assume various shapes. While, at least in Nussbaum's understanding, there is arguably a core set of functionings that is universal and non-negotiable (for example, physical integrity), many other functionings are specific yet essential for individuals. Different from the other perspectives discussed so far, *differentiation*, in the capability approach, is neither the outcome of a systemic development nor the result of oppressive practices, but a context-sensitive negotiation of functionings. Differentiation, from this perspective, can increase and decrease, without saying anything about

the quality of such changes. A greater number of functionings is not necessarily 'better' or more 'developed', and vice versa (see Lesorogol, 2008). Inclusion, therefore, entails the fulfilment of desired functionings. Depending on the functioning to be fulfilled (or denied), processes of inclusion and exclusion can occur synchronously; similarly, complex feelings of belonging can be expressed through a combination of various functionings, for example, being a recognized professional and a respected member of the community.

The roles of researcher and researched are intertwined in the capability approach and can no longer be clearly divided into *agents* and *patients*. In their search for agentic options and the removal of structural constraints, researchers need to cooperate with the researched (and thus break through Schütz's scientist-homunculus dichotomy), assess needs and define functionings. In particular, the negotiation of *what should be* (such as seemingly universal rights) and of *what is desired* (such as needs arising from cultural traditions that seem to be opposed to universal rights) is an ongoing challenge in this process. The researched, on their part, must be proactive, as the very idea of functionings builds on agency and active choice. In a sense, there is no possibility of opting out, since at least theoretically, not making a choice amounts to (involuntary or intended) self-exclusion.

How does teacher Wang fare with the capability approach? A capability perspective would do justice to the complex networks in which Wang is embedded and which communicate multiple and at times contradictory expectations to him. He, in turn, can have mixed feelings about his own roles in these networks. As an employee at a public school, it would be an important functioning for Wang to be *recognized as loyal* to the state, including the state's initiative of cultural heritage preservation. Equally, he would want to have a say, as an experienced, professional teacher, on curriculum implementation (*professional participation* as functioning), as well as to be a recognized member of the community of X town (*recognized community membership* as functioning). Not all of these functionings are fully achievable. In Wang's reality, some contradict each other; his professionalism may for example interfere with questions of state loyalty. The capability approach leaves open the question of what to make of tensions between universal and context-dependent functionings, or contradictions between individually negotiated functionings: who decides which functionings are negotiable? And is there a vantage point, outside the worlds of researcher and researched, from which functionings can be identified as 'elementary' or 'universal', or of more or less importance?

## Conclusion: all's well that doesn't end

As the discussion above has shown, each of the five conceptualizations of *differentiation* has its merits and demerits, and each sheds light on different aspects of what differentiation can entail, assigning different roles to researcher and researched. All take into account the dialectic of structure and agency, trying to understand if, how, and why differentiation takes place, and which roles the system/society and its inhabitants play in this process.

Thus, the structural-functional and communicative perspectives place the researched persons in passive positions, with the system determining their scope and type of agency, as well as processes of differentiation, while the cultural-historical perspective attempts to strike a balance between system and individuals by emphasizing mutual dependencies and deconstructing *differentiation* as an outcome of specific (historical, cultural, political) constellations. All three perspectives involve researchers who are relatively detached from the researched world.

The last two ways of conceptualizing *differentiation* bring in aspects of social justice and involve engaged researchers. The fourth, hegemonic perspective is interested in exposing the workings of illegitimate power and strives for complicity with oppressed research subjects, while the fifth, the capability perspective, makes the researcher dependent on the researched subject for producing knowledge that does justice to both universal and specific functionings. Regarding norms, values, and conceptions of 'social justice', the fourth perspective is perhaps less self-reflective in that it largely rests on implicit understandings of what a just and equal world means. As demonstrated by Tuck and Yang's (2012) critique of the metaphorization of decolonization, such an approach may

backfire on what is considered a just cause in the first place. By contrast, the capability approach leaves this question intentionally open, and allows for scenarios in which understandings of ‘social justice’ in the researched world may vary considerably, and indeed may clash with those of the researchers. To put it slightly provocatively, the fifth perspective could be regarded as more immune to the researcher’s ‘saviour complex’ compared to the fourth perspective, but runs the risk of relativizing hurtful experiences such as pain, humiliation, and irrelevance.

Ironically, the functionings of the capability approach may be seen as a sort of redressed functionalism, even though the two perspectives depart from very different conceptions of how researcher and researched are related to one another. After all, functionings are about roles to be assumed, in relation to what roles are possible and available. However, the structural-functional approach lacks the ‘grounding’ process of the capability approach, in which agents co-produce understandings and descriptions of their contexts. Seen from an agentic angle, the capability approach may empower the researched world to reclaim processes of differentiation through capability development.

To rephrase the well-known saying ‘all’s well that ends well’, an ending is not what we should ask for, as educationists. I conclude by returning to the purpose of this meta-theoretical discussion: to take a step back and review how differentiation, and with it inclusion and exclusion, have been framed in educational research, and critically investigate how each perspective positions researcher and researched in particular ways—not least because the effects of differentiation (irrespective of the perspective we use) are tangible for each one of us. It is equally important, however, to acknowledge how different research traditions have contributed to the theoretical and empirical problem of *differentiation*, even if one might feel more sympathetic towards one than another. Educational research (and scholarly research in general) is all too often implicated in trench warfare: shooting is easy, but leaving the trench is not (for an example, see the intense debate sparked off by Epstein’s characterization of ‘currents left and right’; Epstein, 1983). This article invites us to leave the victory/defeat narrative of science history behind, and instead acknowledge that it is in fact the pluralism of different epistemological perspectives that makes educational research so valuable, hopefully ensuring an ongoing discussion in the future and contributing to the worlds of both researchers and researched.

## Notes

1. The Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases were searched, using various combinations of the keywords ‘education’, ‘differentiation’, ‘epistem\*’, ‘meta-theor\*’, and ‘philosophy of science’, and a time range between 1950 and 2023. To be included as relevant, search results needed to primarily relate to education (including subfields such as the sociology of education) and refer to *differentiation* as a social process. This means that other uses of *differentiation* (e. g. denoting a teaching technique or a style of reasoning) were excluded from the final results. While most search results could be categorized as one of the five research perspectives described in this article, they did not contain any meta-theoretical investigation into the epistemological foundations of research on differentiation, and hence did not elaborate on the relationship between researcher and knowledge produced about differentiation. Categorizations were made on the basis of the abstracts provided in the database. In about 10 per cent of the sample, the abstracts did not allow for immediate categorization. In these cases, the full text as well as the bibliography were used for categorization.
2. Using the Web of Science and Scopus databases, the search string ‘education AND differentiation’, with a limitation to the field of ‘Education/Educational research’, yielded 2,960 publications. A little under half of these publications were relevant in that they dealt with differentiation in education. Of the remainder, 40 per cent focused on differentiation as a pedagogical tool (mostly related to inclusive education) and 23 per cent used differentiation merely descriptively. The remaining publications could be assigned to the five perspectives described in the article, with the following distribution: Structural-functional (22 per cent), communicative (6 per cent), cultural-historical (45 per cent), hegemonic (25 per cent), and capability formation (2 per cent).
3. Participatory research approaches are not exempt from these considerations. Just like researchers, the people in our researched worlds have been integrated into different (and at times incommensurable) ways of thinking. Participatory research will not by default make the researched world truer in the eyes of all its inhabitants, but at



most from the viewpoint of those who take part in, and co-design, the research. Those excluded may harbour substantially different and perhaps challenging notions of what *differentiation* means to them, as observers, practitioners, students etc.

4. All names are pseudonyms.
5. Inverted commas are used for 'traditional' and 'modern' since they are clearly constructions made by the observer/researcher.
6. Although some would categorize Luhmann as a '(neo)-functionalist', I adhere to the perspective's central aspect of 'communication' when labelling this approach; cf. Elder-Vass (2007, p. 408), who concedes that 'Luhmann himself would perhaps have rejected this label [of functionalism; B. S.]'.
7. All translations into English are my own.
8. With the potential exception of new institutionalism and its argument of a Western-defined modernity (cf. the critique in Carney et al., 2012). Also, the excessive focus on national cultures implies the risk of methodological nationalism (cf. Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002; for education, see the critique in; Robertson & Dale, 2008).

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