Against Elites – a polemic of a functional-equivalent Managing of Gender & Diversity

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**Abstract:** In this paper the relation of elite constructions and diversity studies is explored. Elites can be perceived as a social constructed minority, who get their legitimacy by ascriptions of extraordinary competences. In critical social situations and status their functional relevance is to secure reality by complexity reduction. This contradicts diversity initiatives with ideas to deconstruct homogeneous and hegemonic settings. Functional equivalents to elite constructions are explored.

**Keywords:** diversity studies,theory of social systems, elites, functional equivalents in social systems

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1. **The Hare and the Hedgehog – or how effective are constructions of elites?**

Elites seem to have almost undeniably been a part of all (pre)modern formations of

societies[[1]](#footnote-1). This rhetoric of omnipresence makes it difficult to renounce the idea of guidance by social elites, and – much more inconvenient or challenging to us – these statements are in opposition to a Managing Diversity founded on the principle of participation and orientated to a democratic rather than elitist recruiting of executives and high performing personnel.

Does Managing Diversity (MD) eventually start from an illusionary concept of economics and society? Or can MD not be conceived without an elitist leadership, but then rather in a democracy skeptical, cynical sense because thus it becomes a camouflaged ideology instead of being realistically orientated to a society model governed by elites? And, would it then be the task of a MD theory to elucidate how elites make themselves indispensable[[2]](#footnote-2) - in an almost essentialist way?

This would comply with a fear related to a conspiring setting that a career- and performance orientated mass must be subordinated to an elitist leadership and governance of interactive social and organizational processes, and elites – disregarding the form of government – need the masses to secure their privileged living standards (Münkeler/Straßberger/Bolender, 2007). Then MD would only serve as an emotional incentive for the masses, whether or not encouraging an apparently democracy-compatible shaping of economic, political, administrative performance.

This rather skeptical starting point encourages us to ask – after outlining a possible social function of elite (constructions) - *how*MD can represent an alternative to producing elites.

Managing Diversity as a human-resources and organization orientated management action,

intends to develop and make use of a given diversity of personnel according to the requirements of business management (Cox, 1993). This calls for abolishing the hegemonic privileges, respectively for initiating the modification of elitist inclusion and recruiting processes. Diversity or difference refers to individual differences and similarities as well as group identity. It qualifies and strengthens social differences; it demands for equal treatment of the unequal. It expects acceptance instead of indifference trying to understand what intolerance amounts to. MD tends to allow for more diversity in action, styles of definition and interests.

This paradoxical but practical definition hints at the capability of the concept of MD to perceive an increase of complexity[[3]](#footnote-3), which has already existed for long in society. The construction of (gender)binary has a complexity-reducing function for social systems by using historically and socially well proven patterns of differentiation for the structuring of division of labor, forms of assessment, structures of directives, chances of communication, distribution of resources and many more (Koall, 2001). Focusing on the *extraordinary* elitist people is another *solution* to deal with the problem of complexity.

However, it seems to us that it is not appropriate. Furthermore, it would be relevant to ask for functions and possible alternatives to the production of elites and how a concept such as MD can contribute to produce performing elites in a more “democracy-compatible“ way.

But is it possible to recruit elites in “democracy-compatible“ ways, that is, is it possible to basically recruit and admit members on the basis of performance and excellence to the inner circle of the shaping and definition of societies? If the answer to this question is *yes*, a promotion of minorities in the sense of MD is possible and necessary by focusing more on resources and thus discovering hidden capabilities that have been neglected so far and can be integrated into the process of performance. In the same way biographic experience hitherto neglected (bi-nationality & creativity, experience in special communities, resistance to discrimination) can contribute to the solution of problems of society. The aim would be to enhance a permeability of society that would offer access to a wider potential of qualification and higher chances of identification with a society or an organization.

Assuming that a democratic recruitment of elites seems to be hardly possible at the moment (a great number of empirical studies speak for this view, cf. Hartmann, 2002 2007) the determination and assessment of the necessary, special quality of social resources is encouraged by a change – by a systemic-logical process of functional equivalence. The point is not about the production and promotion of a particular social group such as women or elites, but to change the opposition of elites and homogeneous masses. The assumption of a social permanence of elites can be qualified by different contextualization. We (Diversion: Managing Gender & Diversity, Dortmund University) observe in diversity training programs how in organizations privileged persons fight even the smallest irritations of their status in diversity processes. This defensive behavior – apart from fear of loss of normalcy, former causality etc. - hints at an inherent dynamic of this concept: the subversive shaking of the hidden basic principles of power, limited chances of participation and distribution of resources. Furthermore, our experience of conflicts or (de-)legitimation of evaluation and decision criteria in diversity training programs lead to the skeptical question whether organizations do, in fact, depend on persons (Baecker, 2007) who need to be labeled belonging to elites' in order to reduce confusion and legitimize and resist the pressure of decision making.

The distinction between elites and the masses blurs our view of existing social phenomena – that is, looking above and below induces us to find only what we are looking for. Jansen (2006) proposes not to start from the assumption that there is a decision-making elitist leadership of a society but from the fact that there is a 'sub'-leadership legitimated by a wide preparation of later decision-making.

Performance can thus be generated in completely different ways. We can start from the idea that excellent performance of a few encourages a system – a society or organization – to make especially valuable contributions to the solution of social as well as economic or political problems. And the performers have to be found and shaped. Or we can start from the idea that different forms of experience and, evolving from them, different qualifications and qualities which mark and link the diversity of human beings, can be combined and organized in a social process so that the whole system is capable of performing excellently (Stacey, 2002)[[4]](#footnote-4).This basic idea is the foundation of our systemic-constructivist approach to MD and needs – now constructed as a dilemma – the overcoming of dominance and elites.

Discursive assumptions of elitist constructions (Münkler/Bohlender/Strassenberger, 2006) start from a process of attributions of responsibility, expertise, prominence and prestige in organizations and assume that elitist action can only be seen as such if plausibility and acceptance for the action is generated. This hint at discursive and functional ways of the construction of elites makes it clear that structures of systems and their functional solutions – which *rational*and strategic discourses sometimes orientate them to – are the result of introspective communicative processes (Luhmann, 1984). As a consequence it is possible that instead of organizational hierarchies functional equivalents develop (Luhmann, 1984) Thus, we think, hierarchical structures as one basis of elitist control can be substituted. Action reduces the complexity of communication (Luhmann 1984: 20) and the capability to act, or in other words, *intelligence*or *perspective*is sometimes ascribed to persons who have been invested with them distinctions of belonging to elites. What if this *clarity**of**perspective*does not lead to adequate but only to conventional solutions? Thus Jansen (2007) referring to Luhmann's concept of conflict says that elites, in addition to their greater efficiency, should be given a higher degree of freedom...“for determined decision - making... courageous innovative power ...productive misunderstanding“ and should be freed from too narrow social forms of integration, which are held responsible for the conflicts with elites. But even here the problem of a re-introduction of a differentiation (elites/masses) emerges which then is partly solved as “it is thinkable, that we will need pioneers rather than elites, that is beginners, founders, navigators in difficult terrain... change of the present observance of elites... of the potential of biographies“ (Jansen, 2006) Now we could stop focusing on the elitist position of a person in a group and concentrate on the conditions to open up chances (Galtung 1978) for productive diversity.

What do we win if we reconstruct diversity as a discursive person- or personality-related quality and entity? We will find starting-points in alternatives to hierarchies as functional equivalents and will be able to influence by discourse the supervision and interpretation of attribution and ascription of capabilities to qualities. This requires courage and the burden of self-description instead of acceptance of a description from an outward perspective.

1. ***Mother Hulda's Kind and Unkind Girl - or are elites always gendered?***

The term 'elites' can be considered according to Metz-Göckel (2004) as a further criterion of selection which is held responsible for the exclusion of women by declaring a formerly inacceptable term politically correct. For 'it is not alone performance that counts but also enforcement and acceptance in the context of social organizations are a precondition for the participation in academic elites' (Metz-Göckel, 2004). Generally the problem of transformation of 'talent into achievement' (or power into performance) exists in the promotion of elites, for one can never be sure that people with talent possess enough social expertise to be able to integrate into a team or organizational structures so that performance is generated. As a consequence integration into social networks proves indirectly that the future member of the elites can survive the long march through the rites of initiation and institutions by positioning themselves in a balancing act between adjustment and self-positioning. Therefore the topic of 'Gender & Elites' is often discussed as 'Women in Leadership Positions' (Metz-Göckel, 2004).Thus the leadership position can be described as being a member of the performing elites who insist on a successful hierarchical advancement in career. Which kind of qualification or quality wins is the result of attribution and assessment sometimes coming about rather at random? This also triggers off the problem that the employment of personnel in organizations produces social homogeneity and characteristics showing ability to perform cannot be identified in a member of an unknown social group, which means that recruiting processes are determined by preferences of personality and ideas of normalcy of the decision maker in the context of a so-called 'job holder schema' (Ely, 1995). A shaping of instruments for the recruitment of personnel and a targeted control and assessment of the decision makers in the context of MD opens up chances to avoid excluding procedures. What is required further is access to and co-optation in internal, elite-producing networks. In this context studies show that women belonging to minorities succeed less in gaining admission to strategic networks and are less successful than members of the hegemonic male group, if they are the majority in an organization, and this means to invest women and men with different social capital (Bourdieu, 1978), in order to make their performance publicly known. Women only succeed in strategic networks, if there is a 'powerful' male mentor, and if women have achieved a high position the range and intensity of contacts do not differ remarkably from those of men (Mayr-Kleffel, 2004).

Discussions on elites therefore do have (gender-)homogeneous effects when systems develop plausible procedures of legitimization and mechanisms of excluding members and ways of maintaining the privileges of insiders. A systemic argument is that in this way the different social connectors can be kept as small as possible and internal complexity can be kept out by excluding variety. Thus other conceptions of normalcy than the familiar, conventional ones and the irritation of stability can be avoided. In this way the congruity of social and organizational hierarchies is maintained (Brewer, 1995) or rather it can be avoided that organizations react adequately to social (e.g. demographic) changes, let alone incite social change (Hannan and Freeman, 1989).

1. ***How can functional equivalents be shaped?***
   1. ***Assumptions to deconstruct elites***

Elites do function - this is the first thesis - because they avoid latency, absorb uncertainty, establish reliability and reduce complexity (Jansen, 2007 with reference to Luhmann, 2000). This happens because they become projection screens, as elites are attributed the capability to make 'intelligent' decisions and the taking over of responsibilities for these decisions in an increasingly complex world. This attribution of decision-making responsibility has relieving effect and gives the elites a 'redeeming' function. In doing so a certain quality is referred to which has always been outstanding for the regulation of societies. These *chosen*ways of thinking and acting can blot out a variety of otherness (e.g. that in almost every either regionally or time-bound *other* culture there are different styles of thought and perception as well as ways of action that have turned out to be *superior*) and in this way reduce complexity. However, *chosen* ways of thinking cannot be received at random, but admission has to be regulated or even decided on by society – through exclusive procedures – and by this circle of exclusiveness – superiority – exclusiveness the necessary redundancy to generate plausibility is established.

To bring about excellence, elites can be replaced by MD - this is our second thesis - by orientating itself to elitist ways of functioning to reduce complexity. This argument comes from the assumption that former minorities do not become new elites. To pursue the question of how MD can contribute to the tackling of elitist social regulation and organization of resources it might be helpful to explain first the figure of the functional equivalent.

* 1. ***Functional equivalents***

The systemic-logical figure of the functional equivalent (Luhmann, 1984) offering an alternative to the idea of recruiting elites in the context of diversity is a concise part of systemic thought. It is meant to make systemic solutions comparable to each other. A functional equivalent enables us to leave the limits of existing expectations and still keep up the capability of the system to fulfill its tasks. This is possible although expectations do have a distinctive effect on the engendering and functioning of systems. To identify functional equivalents a problem needs to be defined in a way that alternative solutions can be compared with each other, e.g. heterogeneous versus homogeneous teams.

To do this the problem is pragmatically measured against the system - environment - conditions, which means that we ask what the task or function of the system is and which conditions of the environment provide the conditions to identify and fulfill this task or function. It is important not to be guided so much by known cause-and-effect chains than by focusing on the conditions of the environment (e.g. to try out more acquisition and personnel flexibility in slowdown of sales instead of cost-reducing suspension of staff). Furthermore, it is important to look for possibilities that connect task-fulfilling functions and structures hitherto not regarded (e.g. qualified part-time jobs instead of 70-hour-week).

It might be sensible for the decision makers to orientate themselves in this process to functions rather than norms or ideals, which makes social facts comparable and replaceable (e.g. non conventionality versus stability of values). The precondition for the efficiency of functional equivalents therefore is an organization of the system that is orientated more to functions than hierarchies and norms. Functional equivalents can become acceptable alternatives, inherent to the system and opposed to normatively determined discrimination (Koall, 2001). What remains a problem is that business management rationalities are basically not different from normative assumptions about how processes and structures can be organized. Therefore the mix-up of systemic functions and operational rationalities, respectively justifications, is delicate and omnipresent at the same time (Hannappi-Egger, 2006). For at least officially the orientation of companies to operational functions goes without saying and normative orientation (Baecker, 1994) or hierarchies (Baecker, 1993) are rather discussed as problem areas. To identify functional equivalents it is necessary to distinguish on the one hand between norms and rationalities that are founded in a cultural system and offer orientation for the staff and, on the other hand, the tasks that a system has to fulfill and does so if it wants to continue to exist. But what is seen in a system (such as the organization of a university) as a meaningful fulfillment of tasks is often shaped by people in a process which includes partiality, power of definition, struggle for power, micro-political scheming etc. But the medium- and long-term decision on what is meaningful for the survival of an organization also depends on how much space for creativity and consent is given to persons. And this hits the crucial point in the topic of elites: for members of this social group are granted considerably more expertise in the control of systems, and this triggers something off....

1. ***About functions of elites aiming at alleged reduction of social complexity***

In texts and discourses about the power of elites (Hitzler et al., 2005) we also find that elites are granted capabilities to contribute to the reduction and relief from social complexity in a reality gradually growing more complex and fragmented. Decisions of elites seem to be far reaching and have long-term effect. That means elites are allowed to concentrate power because in this way they contribute to “establishing of a long-range effect of seemingly limited problem solving“(Hornbostel, 2004). In this way I think the crucial function of elites to reduce complexity is described: Elites should take over responsibility for the (unintended) side effects that almost always develop from standardized decisions. The aim is to remain capable of acting in a society that on the grounds of conflicting demands and confusing consequences of political and social action has become too complex for simple, good, clear-cut solutions.

However, the idea that elites have a clear view to make far-reaching, long-term decisions presents a problem: The background of experience and the basis of action is a homogeneous social repertoire of a certain milieu. Their range is limited to problem solving in this particular bourgeois milieu, for either the decision makers have been born into it or, in the course of their social rise, have made efforts to adjust to and imitate these values (Hartmann, 2002). This is also true inside the hierarchy of organizations that are formed in order to identify different problems and bring about a standardized solution. What would happen now if one did not refer to *an*elitist quality but to a quality of diversity? It would become obvious that there are different interests corresponding to different social milieus and presenting different adequate solutions which come from different functions in different social milieus and organizational areas. However, as a consequence, one should renounce the idea of an overall problem solving and a common validity of the solution. But – as the prognosis on the development of elites in knowledge-based societies by Stehr et al. (2007) suggests – this may increasingly become irritating through the diffusion of the relation between power and knowledge. Progress in knowledge is socialized and will, in future, no longer serve only the ruling group so that the expertise of elites or of institutions that represent them can be challenged.

Another alleged advantage of elitist action is the fact that in increasingly confusing society’s clear relationships of inferiority and superiority can be simulated by the distinction between and creation of *elites*and *mainstream*(Nassehi, 2004). But what are then functional equivalents that help to find hierarchical orientation? Assuming that we can compare elitist controlling processes to hierarchical structures we can look for functionally equivalent diversity structures (such as network structures or “boundary less organizations“) (Koall/ Bruchhagen, 2005). In contrast, focusing on hierarchical, causal dependency avoids the problem that often occurs in systems, namely that it is about the interdependency of acknowledgement and providing of performance, or even about the monitoring of and distinction between the leading persons and the staff working in subordinate structures on preparing decisions (Jansen, 2007). Social relationships are mostly reciprocal. This can mean to place emphasis on network-like acceptance of social expertise on the basis of differences and similarities. For clarity and decision-making capability – that is security – do not only develop hierarchically but also on the basis of a multi-dimensional social network. This means that we renounce institutions of binary relationships of inferiority and superiority and manage social dependencies. This means, too, to renounce an excellent scale of assessing social relationships.

In an elitist bourgeois civilization the power of definition is exerted on civilized and desirable forms of living that, on the one hand, are defined as a precondition for a successful life and, on the other hand, work as entrance and exclusion criteria for the creation and preservation of social stratification (Bourdieu, 1987), respectively serve as social seed capital for professional opportunities and promotion (Hartmann). However, in this way a possible pluralism of values is reduced and irritation of the *other*avoided. A functional equivalent would then consist in changing the ordering and decision-making functions that are implied in the power of definition about desirable forms and styles of living. Probably is is possible to pay attention to and handle verbalized or non-verbalized social rules in a more playful way. To touch the limits or even go beyond is here a precondition to learn or even simulate social affiliation.

Nassehi (2004) says that recourse to values that rely on moral superiority and inferiority are no longer effective in a fragmented, highly complex social context. Instead, he observes an ability coming up in the discussion of functional equivalent solutions to translate different forms of functional logic from one system into another and acknowledge the respective differences of these different forms of logic. This would mean to explain the economic functional logic that passes from the economic system through the political on to the academic system where exactly these economic imperatives are effective at present. This ability to navigate the boundaries (between cultures, social stratifications or social functional systems) and recognize and communicate the different ways of thought characterizes a diversity personality. This means to be able to be self-critical and, in relation to others, flexible enough to take on different perspectives and ways of action and not see oneself in the center of moral and intellectual dominance.

A further hint at the construction of powerful elites is the fact that performance is always connected with its appreciation and that this requires a presentation of performance or staging of one's own achievements (Pfadenhauer and Hitzler, 2004). The appreciation of performance is provided symbolically and is a part of the cultural system. All that can be connected, for example, with status symbols, dress codes, or habitus (such as leisure activities) and classifies human beings socially serves the profiling of performance. This profiling is connected with the intention to exert power. An individual is seen as powerful when she or he is able to tackle social demands on her or him individually and adequately (Luhmann, 1982). This may mean to have to cope with ambivalent requirements in professional roles and appear as professional *and*inventive or as reliable *and*creative. However, whether and how individual performance can be presented is a question of a cultural process that is embedded in social-structural processes and their functions.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Bourgeois styles of communication, cultural techniques and status symbols profit from the advantage that they are known as conventions, have been accepted successfully and therefore are easily *recognized*. The adaptation of conventions serves the confirmation of elitist recruiting processes. A chance for change through iteration, however, can come about when old, elitist patterns of presentation are mixed with patterns of relationships and ways of thinking from different social milieus and cultures. This is about the capabilities for individual self-presentation, which evolves from the enrichment of social styles and creates a re-combination of already familiar and new elements. Self-presentation aiming at documenting one's ability to perform is a social technology – and its presentation can be trained and varied. What is necessary, though, is the ability to examine and understand contexts in view to their social-experimental content.

The variation of bourgeois-elitist styles is not in all situations feasible. But the appropriateness of presentation and context will decide whether a presentation of performance is accepted or refused. In this way the recognition and understanding of the conceptuality of presentations of performance becomes a functional equivalent of fairness in the assessment of performance.

However, these processes of variation of elitist styles and the observance of context concerning the presentation of performance cannot simply be made, but do need time for organizations and persons to develop. So this is about the problem that abandoning elitist standards should take place rather in phases (Höher, 2002):

* Organizational change happens by evolution and connects to existing structures

(e.g. setting-up and executing procedures, guidelines of management, assessment procedures).

* Human beings in organizations are affected by the change to greater heterogeneity,

they have to be convinced of the advantages and, during a phase of insecurity, be

enabled to mature to more complexity.

* Social 'minorities' should be given enough time and space to develop expertise and self-esteem, necessary to create individual positions, products, strategies and integrate them into the corporate culture.

Perhaps it is also about the ability to participate in the shaping of a process of social change aware of one's own diversity qualities and related to the social system. For that purpose *knowledge-based expertise of action*- such as faculty of speech, scopes of action, organization of protection and resistance – is extremely helpful.[[6]](#footnote-6) This also corresponds to the fact that MD refers to different, more socially acceptable patterns of performance assessment and - instead of emphasizing competition and individualization – tries to find out possibilities of solidarity and cooperation in the context of orientation to society. In this way a strengthening of democratizing tendencies in organizations is in focus, which means, according to Mayer, that cooperative decision-making processes and the need for a broad and optimal training are put to the test inside an organization. He continues: “The whole new debate about elites gives the impression of a phantom pain, that means, a perception of something that existed once but does not exist and cannot exist anymore“ (Mayer, 2007). The discussion about elites according to him is rather a sign of the discourse about different social systems – between neoliberal hubris a failure (ibid.) Discourses on diversity have the potential to take an active part in the process.

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1 cf. Münkeler (2007) Discourses about elites of pre-modern classical writings, like Niccolo Macchiavelli (Der Fürst,1553 ), Vilfred Pareto (System der allgemeinen Soziologie 1916, dtsch.1962) or Gaetano Mosca (Die herrschende Klasse, 1886 , dtsch. 1950) can be reconstructed as a glorification of elites, or also as democracy-compatible such as Dreitzel (Elitebegriff und Sozialstruktur, 1962) establishes it in a more modern view of society presenting elites as democracy-capable, highly specialized managing executives in modern industrial societies. The description of the effect and the meaning of elites vary, of course. What seems significant to us is what Münkeler describes as the repeated failure of elites in the twentieth century – which generated the First World War as well as the terror regime of the National Socialists engendering subsequently the Second World War. In East German society the third failure of elites in the twentieth century follows with dramatic economic and social consequences because of lacking elitist recruiting processes. In West German post-war society a phase of reflexive invisibility of West German elites could be stated which allowed for confidence in corporate action (in political and economic institutions such as trade unions, political parties, and lobby groups). Currently the question is being discussed (Münkeler/Bohlender/Strassenberger, 2006) if the increasing focusing on shareholder interests has generated the increasing loss of importance of (neo-) corporative actors and, 'as an ancillary consequence', introduces lobbyist actors into new areas of negotiation. This failure of elites is seldom understood as a failure of the idea that elites have crucial functions in society, on the contrary, it is explained by incompetent recruiting, by horizontal/vertical inclusion etc.

   2 Thus the taking into account of personalities as media (Baecker, 2007), who can be trusted with and assigned to, if at all, the temporary and individually accepted, extremely stressful task of this elitist function. Jansen (2007) considers this rather to be a media event which makes paradoxical demands on elites, basically passing off depersonalized decisions in public as personal decisions- and it is not astonishing that a negative correlation between media presence and corporate performance has been stated (ibid.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 Paradoxes are meant to invisibilize ambivalences and blockages (Luhmann 2002:421)

   4 The distinction between individual and collective (knowledge) is cancelled. „Mind is the action of the body, just as relationships are and individual minds and social relationships arise together, simultaneously.“(Stacey 2002: 8) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 Luhmann (1982) did link the ability to stylize individuality with social-structural conditions and the typifying of differences in social systems

   6 Stehr et al. (2007)“ To sum it up one can state that the bunch of knowledge-based social expertise offers access to resources of action which help to master many situations in life, such as questions of personal health, financial status, style of living, professional opportunities, long-term material security etc. Furthermore, chances of individuals and groups are increased to ask for expert opinion to solve these tasks and thus facilitate a socially more differentiated handling of relevant forms of knowledge. The skill to mobilize resistance to or take advantage of the scopes of action or organize protection is an 6 Stehr et al. (2007)“ To sum it up one can state that the bunch of knowledge-based social expertise offers access to resources of action which help to master many situations in life, such as questions of personal health, financial status, style of living, professional opportunities, long-term material security etc. Furthermore, chances of individuals and groups are increased to ask for expert opinion to solve these tasks and thus facilitate a socially more differentiated handling of relevant forms of knowledge. The skill to mobilize resistance to or take advantage of the scopes of action or organize protection is an important part of such tactics or strategies and contributes essentially to the building of an awareness that enables people to control social situations and not be the victim or at the mercy of accidental circumstances.“ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)