

Narratives of Achievement in African and Afro-European Contexts

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Schedule & Abstracts



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DER HHU DÜSSELDORF

UNIVERSAL AGENDAS – PARTICULAR PRACTICES

9:50 - 10:10

Jo Littler

Neoliberal meritocracy: how transnational is it?

Today, ‘meritocracy’ is generally taken to mean a ‘fair’ social system in which people can progress to the top of the social pile if they work hard enough to activate their talent. This paper analyses how meritocracy is racialised in contemporary neoliberal cultures. In the process it considers genealogies of the discourse in relation to imperialist histories; as the historical emergence of meritocracy can be understood in relation to Western possessive individualism and its concomitant imperial projects. By contrast, contemporary neoliberal meritocracy can be understood as extracting and mobilising elements of democratic struggles, including anti-racism and anti-sexism, and fusing these with arguments to expand corporate marketisation and privatisation. These phenomena have been observed, with different articulations, in sites from Singapore to South Africa, from the US to the UK. Drawing on an array of examples (including #MeToo and news media) this paper attempts to open a discussion about the differences within and across transnational neoliberal meritocracy and about the extent to which these discourses are being challenged and disrupted.



10:10 - 10:30

Steve Tonah

“Becoming a Chief is more important than anything else in life”. Interrogating the notions of success and fulfilment among Mamprusi royals in Northern Ghana.

The Mamprusi have a hierarchically-organized but decentralized traditional polity in Northern Ghana. Mamprusi society can be broadly categorized into the groups of royals, professionals and ordinary residents. The most cherished aspiration of every Mamprusi (royals and non-royals) is to be made a leader (chief) of a settlement by the King or a paramount chief. Becoming a chief or a titled person brings prestige, wealth, power and other non-material resources to the incumbent and his/her relations. Competition for chieftaincy titles is therefore fierce at every level of society. Today, as in the past, residents serve their communities and leaders diligently and mobilize their wealth, financial resources, social network, links to politicians, consultation with spiritual leaders and assemble formidable campaign teams to convince electors for backing for any available chiefly positions. Using information based on research conducted between 2005 and 2016, this paper examines the importance of chieftaincy titles amongst the Mamprusi, the nature of the competition for titles and why residents often mobilize their economic, social, political and spiritual capital to obtain a traditional chieftaincy title, sometimes at the detriment of their households and relatives. The paper concludes that most Mamprusi still prefer being successful in the traditional settings over the modern state sector. Furthermore, royals and non-royals seek titles at the lower level of traditional governance for self-fulfilment and prestige reasons while higher level titles bring power, wealth, and access to labor as additional benefits.

11:50 - 12:10

*Mpho Tshivhase***Considering communal aspects of narrating achievement**

An achievement can be loosely understood as an event that marks some remarkable accomplishment that people often respond to by celebrating it as a triumphant moment. Achievements are generally positively received and tend to invoke a sense of pride in the achiever and those around him/her. The narration of an achievement is often contextualized. A narration, understood in part as a process that involves the hermeneutic process of interpretation, unavoidably comprises of different perspectives. The varying perspectives, while they may share the same point of reference, i.e. an achievement, do not always share the same interpretation and meaning. What it means for the achiever to accomplish something is not necessarily identical to another person's perspectives. Herein lies the danger of misrepresenting an achievement. However, my concern here does not lie with the correctness of an interpretation and narration of an achievement – the truth of a narration, as it were. I am rather interested in the relational elements of one's personhood and their implications for narration of a person's achievement. African scholars, such as Dismas Masolo and Ifeanyi Menkiti, insist that a person is marked by the way s/he embraces his/her relationality with others. Given the relational nature of a person, at least as understood from the African perspective, is it possible for an achievement and the narration thereof to be communal? I plan to explore the African value of relationality and its possible role in the narration of achievement. I hope to defend the view that an achievement and the narration thereof should not necessarily maintain an individualistic tone because, while one's talent may arguably be an individualistic matter, the exploration and development of that talent, which is a necessary condition achievement, is generally a matter that involves many others in the community, hence my consideration of the communal aspects of narrating achievement.



12:10 - 12:30

*Florian Elliker***On negotiating universality and particularity in student residence cultures in South Africa. Crafting inclusive diversity in organizational transformation**

In this presentation, I present a secondary qualitative data analysis that focuses on how students' perspectives on tertiary education in South Africa are shaped by notions of achievement and meritocracy. The analysis draws on an ethnographic case study on the transformation process of student residences. Some of the major institutions of education in South Africa haven been (at least partially) modelled after typical "Western" notions of education. It thus comes as no surprise that scholarly analysis, political discourse, and everyday perspectives in and on the field of education revolve around the notion of "meritocracy". The ideology of meritocracy has played an important role in the modernization process of Western societies, providing theories of legitimation for how the social position and status of individuals are to be constituted and justified: It is not "ascription" (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, class, or gender), but individual "achievement" in an "open competition" that should serve as the major principle for how *unequal but morally deserving* outcomes are (to be) distributed. This has in many ways remained at best an ideal, as educational institutions con-

tinue to reproduce ascribed inequalities by being—*inter alia*—attuned to and favouring specific forms of cultural capital over others, presenting ascribed characteristics of students and their resulting educational outcomes in the language of achievement. In an African and Afro-European context, this also intersects in complex ways with ethnically specific bodies of knowledge. Student residences constitute important social worlds in the life of students and relate in different ways to the well-being and success of the students; their contested transformation is partially related to how students (and university staff) think about achievement. The presentation aims to shed light on how negotiations concerning the culture of student residences are intertwined with discourses of achievement and meritocracy.



14:50 - 15:10

Katja Hericks & Mina Godarzani-Bakhtiari

Efficient production: the paradigm of productivity in the International Labour Organization

In the late 1930s and 40s, during and immediately after World War II, the idea of how to measure economic welfare globally and locally changed significantly. Up until then, welfare had been operationalized as production rates: the more a country produced in goods, the higher its economic wealth. Although working time had become a core focus of national and international policy making in many countries around the globe since ca. 1870, and although the very first ILO convention in 1919 concerned itself with this very aspect of common welfare, it was not until 1949 that working time was introduced into the measurement of economic wealth combined with the measurement of productivity (ILO 1949). This new paradigm came to be merged with the concept of equal pay and both paradigms fueled each other (Hericks/Wobbe 2017). We argue that productivity is a rationalized myth which seemingly encompasses all aspects of labour rights and suggestively serves labourers, nations and employers equally (ILO 2014). It serves as a ‘world formula’ to merge achievement and basic rights into one framework. At the same time, it allows for a comparison between continents and countries, and thus places African countries into rankings based on this specific measure. We will elaborate on how productivity is framed by and frames ideas of social and economic progress and global development with the example of the ILO.

Hericks, K & T. Wobbe (2017): “Ein Sieg des Fortschritts? In: Neo-Institutionalismus – Revisited. Ed. M. Funder. Baden-Baden: Nomos. 71-96.

International Labour Office. (1951). *Methods of Labour Productivity Statistics: Report prepared for the seventh International Conference of Labour Statisticians*. London: Staples Press.

ILO (2014): A Goodwill Message by Ms. Sina Chuma-Mkandawire, Abuja, 10 September 2014.



15:10 - 15:30

Manuela Boatcă

Inventing Africa: From European narratives of achievement to E.U. development discourses

Social scientific discourses that connect global inequalities of income, education, life expectancy and democratic rights to cultural values and attitudes of civilizations and ethnic groups

have been commonplace in development studies as well as in civilizational analysis until very recently. The latter literature, in particular, has famously pitted Puritan thrift and hard work, viewed as largely European values, against an allegedly African “distaste for work” and “suppression of individual initiative” or against a perceived Islamic fatalism and suppression of enterprise. While such discourses are increasingly questioned and countered by postcolonial and critical race studies, among others, they are part of a long-standing Western imaginary that posits Europe and Africa at opposite ends on a scale of achievement, development, and civilization. The paper traces the continuities of such discourses to an Occidentalist construction of Western uniqueness premised on the invention of otherness since the European colonial expansion and zooms in on a particular moment of this construction, the mid-20th century political and economic discourse after decolonization. It aims to show how the emergence of the European Economic Community as the EU’s predecessor went hand in hand with an intellectual, political and institutional discourse that presupposed the transformation of the strictly national colonial projects into a joint European colonization of Africa, and, thus, how inventing Africa in a Western European lens shaped notions of achievement and development imbued with colonial racist tropes.



16:50 - 17:10

Ruby Magosvongwe

The confluence and convergence of African writers’ minds, themes and aspirations in Mashingaidze Gomo’s *A Fine Madness* (2010): A Pan-African view of ‘madness’ or acquittal?

Many have been the philosophies and theories of literature used to explore, interrogate, understand, and appreciate the literary creativity, productivity and outputs from great African minds as depicted in the works of art from the Diaspora and mainland Africa. In the double-barrelled ‘fine madness’ of literary creativity, and the agency in self-narration, we get a panoramic view and confluence of minds, themes, fears, aspirations, pitfalls and hopeful triumphalism. Mashingaidze Gomo’s *A Fine Madness*, the text that anchors my discussion, shows that writing from a position of privilege and power could never be bed-mates with writing from a position of need after a violent stripping off of one’s dignity and sense of being, and raises questions about how and why ‘madness’ could ever be appropriated and deciphered as ‘fine’. I focus on the truncated growth and expanse of African literature as encapsulated in this focal text, but my overall thrust is on achievements, debates, contributions and even foibles of a many African writers. There is an ultimate desire to arrive at the establishment of an African agency in the light of the African conundrum from colonial conquest to the post-independence quest for sustainable livelihoods, peace and survival for all. My discussion explores the strengths and foibles in African Literature and lives, drawing parallels between *A Fine Madness* and some landmark texts in African Literature. Why take the whole panorama into account? Africa’s history, struggles, achievements and destiny are a labyrinthine continuum that demands a holistic appreciation. African triumphalism and Afro-futurism notwithstanding, the texts beg to be read using lenses that embrace African thought and philosophy, which undergird the present discussion.



NARRATIVES OF FORMATION

9:50 - 10:10

Sissy Helff

Of digital databases and family albums -- reading Indian Ocean photography as narratives of achievement

Photography, media communication and cultural production are becoming more complex in a world of ever growing, globally active and multi-interconnected communities. Mieke Bal explores cross-continental and transcultural communication networks in her scholarly writing and in her artwork through the concept of migratory aesthetics (2008/2009) in which she openly criticises the lack of research on the overlapping fields of migration and media. Liza Hopkins argues that this lack is partly due to media studies primarily focusing until recently on the context of national power relations, thereby ignoring the transnational and transcultural uses of media (2009: 37). It is here that my presentation sets out when it seeks to explore the visual representation and cross-cultural re-negotiation of the century-old Asia-African liaison in Indian Ocean photography. Based on a selection of photographs taken from a number of digital picture archives and family albums, this paper seeks to explore the potential of digital(ised) photography in the creation of cross-cultural communication networks and memory cultures. It will be argued that rereading these pictures through a transnational and transcultural lens reveals hitherto untold narratives that challenge common historiographic perspectives with their embedded narratives of achievement. Moreover, my paper sets out to probe the extent to which my selected corpus presents an alternative take on the discursive category of narratives of achievement.



10:10 - 10:30

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong

"What a shock!": On visually mediated narratives of achievement in Ghanaian obituary posters

How does the process of constructing narratives of achievement become concretely mediated through popular media practices? In this presentation, I explore this question within the context of the Ghanaian popular media genre of death-announcement posters. On the surface, they formally announce the death of a community member and the time and location of the performance of the deceased's funeral rites. Through an approach that takes imagination and narrative as entangled (Andrews 2014; 2016) as well as a material approach to culture which focuses on "any aspect of world-making [i.e. full range of thoughts, feelings, objects, words, and practices] that happens in material form" (Morgan 2015: 228), I examine a facet of these posters which mediate narratives of achievement. Via these critical approaches, I show how the posters materialize unique Ghanaian cultural narrative ideologies about achievement associated with, for example, marriage and having and taking care of one's children within marriage.



11:50 - 12:10

Suzanne Scafe

Interrogating the 'achievement principle' in Afro-European contexts: Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) and *Swing Time* (2016).

This presentation examines the ways in which literary fiction is positioned both to refuse the narrative of black underachievement and to interrogate popularly defined models of black achievement in white neo-colonial contexts. The ambivalent achiever, conflicted but poised to rise socially through well-harnessed ability, is a figure with roots in the earliest forms of African diasporic representation: George Lamming's G in *In the Castle of my Skin*, Merle Hodge's Tee, in *Crick Crack Monkey*, or Chinua Achebe's Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease*. In these and other postcolonial texts, characters' success rests on their ability to negotiate the fraught path between "tradition" and Euro-modernity, and/or the socio-historical and cultural contexts within which their route to success is mapped. Achievement is thus the characters' successful projection into European or colonial spaces. Focusing on Zadie Smith's most recent fiction, *NW* and *Swing Time*, I argue that these contemporary texts inherit post-colonial literary traditions that have contested narratives of achievement predicated on the passing of the "native" or black subject into historically or conceptually white spaces. In so doing, Smith's fiction moves representations of the conflict defining routes to success from discourses that centre on a clash of culture, to a consideration of the existential questions her protagonists confront as they begin the route to social mobility. Writing from the perspective of contemporary London, Nirmal Pumar (2004) argues that the arrival of these othered black bodies into spaces from which they have been excluded, sheds a light on what has historically been 'constructed out' and how this exclusion has been performed. By revealing the mechanism by which black othered bodies continue to be excluded, Smith's fiction forces a consideration of the cost to the individual of her own awareness, once the racialized structures defining these institutions have been laid bare. Reading these contemporary novels in relation to mid-twentieth-century examples of postcolonial fiction allows for an understanding of the deep structures that racialize models of success. At the same time, the narratives question not just the availability but the desirability of narratives of achievement that are linear and are defined by colonial or neo-liberal assumptions that endorse the unlimited potential of the autonomous individual. Smith's fiction refuses models of cultural representation that endorse the ideal of wholeness, based on progress and achievement.



12:10 - 12:30

Tina Steiner

Scheherazade's achievement(s): Storytelling and agency in Fatema Mernissi's memoir *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* and *Scheherazade Goes West*

The Moroccan feminist sociologist Fatema Mernissi (1940-2015) is best known for her pioneering work on gender equality in Islam. In this paper however, I wish to focus on her memoir, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, published in 1994 and her reflections on its Eurocentric reception, which culminated in the publication of *Scheherazade Goes West. Different Cultures, Different Harems* in 2001. Both texts deal with the way in which women's agency is circumscribed by particular horizons of constraint determined by their

social contexts and thus the texts contrast local, particular forms of constraint with more diffuse forms of oppression that characterise western modernity. This paper will offer a reading of her harem childhood to trace some of the alternative modes of enacting small freedoms, or achievements, that the memoir documents. As becomes apparent in Mernissi's reflections on the memoir's reception, these achievements seem to be largely illegible within a western feminist paradigm in particular and a meritocratic rationality of development in general. In contrast, Mernissi asserts that such modes of communal sociality – storytelling, performance, artistic production, and self-care as well as a kind of learned psychological acumen – mark direct, albeit subtle, forms of resistance to the constraining circumstances even if they are not necessarily recognised as such. The paper examines how the figure of Scheherazade emerges in the two texts as an example of the kind of psychological acumen that allows women insight into their social context in order to carve out pockets of resistance.



14:50 - 15:10

Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang

Recognition and the satirization of achievement in African conceptual poetry: The case of Nana Awere Damoah's *My Book of #GHCoats*

Nana Awere Damoah's *My Book of #GHCoats* is one of Africa's first examples of conceptual poetry, a genre of digital poetry that largely comes into being through copy and paste techniques. While the strategy of collating data in this manner leads to questions of creativity and originality, the content of the work can inform the nature of engagement. In 2013, the act of attributing fictitious or altered quotes to well-known names went viral among Ghanaian Facebook users; later that year, Nana Damoah compiled a number of these quotes into *#GHCoats*. In this compilation, one notices a two-fold disjunctive trend that occurs in fake quotes attributed to real people on the one hand, and real quotes attributed to fake people on the other hand.

The attendant satire from these disjunctions informs the thrust of this paper, which examines the construction and critique of achievement in *#GHCoats* through the interplay between recognition and satire. I argue that the presence of satire enables a strong understanding of achievement due to the ways in which achievement is imagined in a contemporary Ghanaian digital space.



15:10 - 15:30

Cezara Nicola

Wangechi Mutu's artwork: a case study on Afrofuturism and women's merit

Emerging in the last decade of the twentieth century, Afrofuturism represents a critical perspective particularly relevant to contemporary society and culture. Its connection to technological achievement surfaces in the strong visual features that mark SF literature, but also other cultural realms that rely on representational factors, such as fine arts. Still, Afrofuturism does not fit into a clear-cut category, the likes of an ideological or artistic movement. It

rather provides a flexible framework for investigating the overlaps of techno-culture and black diasporic experience (Womack 2013). Following this claim, I would like to suggest an intersectional approach to Afrofuturism and inquire whether it can cast a critical lens on the discourse of achievement, with a focus on women in African communities. For this purpose, I will discuss a series of artworks depicting African women, created by Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu. I will focus on the way her works allude to meritocratic concepts pertaining to women's role in a changing society. Furthermore, I will consider the possibility that Mutu's artwork might address a possible achievement gap in contemporary society (Schellenberg and Grothaus 2009). Wangechi Mutu uses a variety of media, from painting to sculpture, installation and video. The techniques she prefers involve cutting, layering, collage and assemblage strategies (Rees 2013). Her works often juxtapose different parts of the female body with those of animal origins and also inanimate life. Although they allude to issues like the objectification of women, feminist discourses and meritocratic principles, the artist emphasizes the fact that she does not come from a Western understanding of such concepts. Mutu's works rather represent a transcultural examination originating in the realm of contemporary African art (Rees 2013).



16:50 - 17:10

Eva Ulrike Pirker

"God [...] expects perfection." Narratives of achievement and concepts of value in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* is widely read as a straightforward coming-of-age novel in which the young protagonist Kambili has to face several tests and hardships in her progress towards adulthood. These hardships, however, appear disproportionate when we take into account the oppressive forces impacting Kambili, first and foremost in the person of her choleric, violent and control-obsessed father, a "big man" in business and the Catholic Church, and a major source of orientation and authority for those dependent on him: his employees, the church congregation, his native village, his extended and close family. It is only gradually that we (and Kambili) learn of the growing insecurities of life in Nigeria in the 1960s which affect everyone in the world of adults, even this father whose position appears so unshakeable. My paper explores different discourses of value that are negotiated and complexly intertwined in this novel – individual, communal, economic, religious, spiritual, and educational. Notions of value, merit and achievement are defined by some and imposed on others – in these notions colonial and postcolonial discourses, religious beliefs, global and local educational agendas surface and clash. The novel exposes the oppressive legacy of Western religious systems of punishment and reward and its destructive effects on the individual psyche and communal life. Adichie's characters are indeed, to use Chinua Achebe's words, "no longer at ease". The imperative to perform in all aspects of life, for the sake of absolution, in fulfilment of one's filial or marital duties, for the community or nation appears immense and often absurd. The prominence of the theme suggests that we might not only read *Purple Hibiscus* as a novel of formation, but also as a comment on the state of a community, a nation, a continent or even a world that has subjected itself to principles of performance whose ultimate purpose and aims seem unclear, but whose omnipresence suggest a lack of alternatives.

POLITICS OF SCIENTIFICATION

14:50 - 15:10

Charlotte Williams

Blackademics, Blacademia and the representation imperative

Debates about the representation of Black academics/professionals in the Higher Education workforce of the UK have emerged forcefully in recent times, in particular following the publication of Gabrielle and Tate's *Inside the Ivory Tower* (2018) and work done by the Equality Challenge Unit (2011, 2015). Much of this work has focussed on the tensions, power (or lack thereof) and positioning of Black professionals on the meritocratic ladder. Success in these terms is interpreted as greater representation in the ranks of the academic workforce and in particular at professorial level. My interrogation is: how are these narratives framed and narrated by this cadre of 'Blacademics'? Using the available narratives from these documents and the associated debate I will theorise these scripts of 'success' and 'significance' and locate them within the register of understanding of achievement orientation or meritocratic thinking. How do they relate to what Gail Lewis (2000) has called '*moments in racial time*' in terms of the ways in which opportunity structures are manipulated, categories constructed and service narratives communicated? What insights about the 'ladder' theory of meritocracy or other theorising can be gleaned from these accounts?

<http://blackbritishacademics.co.uk/research/inside-the-ivory-tower/> *This book is centred on the perspectives, experiences and career trajectories of women of colour in British academia. It reveals a space dominated by whiteness and patriarchy, in which women of colour must develop strategies for survival and success. The contributors explore how their experiences are shaped by race and gender and how racism manifests in day-to-day experiences in the academy, from subtle microaggressions to overt racialized and gendered abuse. The autoethnographies touch on common themes such as invisibility and hypervisibility, exclusion and belonging, highlighting intersectional experiences. This is a must-read for students, academics, schools, colleges, trade unions and organizations - and anyone with an interest in equality.*

<https://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/external/experience-of-bme-staff-in-he-final-report.pdf> *Experience of Black and Minority Ethnic Staff in HE – report 2011*

<https://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/academic-flight/> *Black academic flight from UK institutions*



15:10 - 15:30

Anthony I. Okpanachi

A philosophical commentary on the prevailing achievement paradigm in Nigeria

In this presentation I seek to critique the overwhelming understanding and appreciation of the achievement paradigm in Nigeria. A rather brief overview of the state of affairs in Nigeria reveals a seeming tension between what I will term, two models of achievement orientation for want of better expression. I summarise these two models as the magical thinking-based model and the hard work/diligence model which includes a focus on education and science. The premise of my paper is that the former seems more prevalent than the latter and so will be given more attention in this presentation as a way of inviting critical attention to consistently keep the torchlight of interrogation perpetually focussed on it as we strive to build and

improve the society. This paradigm of achievement is not only relevant at the individual level but in the larger social sphere as well. For example, its prevalence in the social sphere is depicted in everyday experiences, epitomised in the vision and values promoted in Nollywood, as it is also embodied by many public institutions and promoted in the religious sphere. It is therefore no surprise that there seems to be an increasing role of religious “merchants” in the emergence of political leaders of government in Nigeria. By contrast, there is underinvestment in, and poor management of, education and science. My intervention is not merely to be conceived as a commentary but a philosophical critique of these issues to underline how crucial these issues and values are because actions and inactions get nourished and reinforced by these conceptualisations and considerations and so become forceful factors in understanding the choices and actions of agents within the larger society. To some extent then the progress and otherwise of the society can be hinged on where these values appear on the scale of relevance among the people and within such a society. In fact, the roles and place of these values are not only in an individual’s perception, understanding of reality and the challenge of life, but much of the societal relevance is impacted upon by these values, such that consistent evaluation/interrogation is an important task and worthy venture.



9:50 - 10:10

Theresa Wobbe

The quantification of the ‘achievement principle’ in the world of work: Between universalistic aspirations and particular meanings

It may come as a surprise, but only since the 1950s achievement and merit have become principles of the labour system. Within the United Nations (UN) and its special agency, the International Labour Organization (ILO) that move was embedded in two different but overlapping fields. That move was embedded in two different but overlapping fields. One dealt with the reconstruction of Western European economies and the eradication of poverty at a global scale, the other with new statistical techniques of counting and comparing income, and the rise of economic models. Both converged in the belief that global inequality could be abrogated through technical expertise. Against this backdrop, the paper discusses the quantitative mode of measurement in which achievement has been envisioned, represented and gained momentum in the world of work. In particular, I will ask which role statistics played in making work an achievement-oriented issue, and how this, in turn, affected concepts of work. How did work achievement become a quantitative issue that could be measured and compared on a global scale? My paper wants to show that presumably universal categories of work achievement have a particular history that still resonate in today’s quantitative schemes reflecting a particular Western ‘achievement principle’. Towards this aim, I will proceed in three steps. Firstly, I will outline the UN and ILOs institutional frame after 1945. By discussing the term ‘economically active people’ I will secondly illuminate how the quantification of achievement emerged and how it works. The statistical category ‘economically active people’ entered the UN and ILO tables in 1947. Ever since it has been extended to the wider world by way of the UN System of National Accounts (SNA) as a universal concept. Thirdly, I will question if market-oriented economic models of achievement have been able

to accommodate both reproductive work at home and the subsistence-oriented work of agrarian production in African countries.



10:10 - 10:30

Lena Kraus

Alternative Narratives of Achievement and Democratic Education – A Model for a Few?

In education, grades measure achievement. But do they? And what does achievement look like at schools that operate without grades? My presentation will provide an insight into the concepts of achievement within Democratic Education contexts.

I am going to introduce the concept of Democratic Education, including its two main pillars, self-directed learning and shared decision-making, and consider Narratives of Achievement that are embraced as well as Narratives of Achievement that are challenged by Democratic Education.

I am going to then give examples of achievement statements from people from within the field of Democratic Education. Looking into those could be a starting point for exploring central Narratives of Achievement within this context and for determining which role pre-existing personal and cultural concepts of achievement play in educational choices and how certain educational models pre-select according to their Narrative of Achievement. Most importantly, it could be a first step to identifying aspects of educational environments which foster concepts of achievement helpful for facing the challenges of our time.

Democratic Education is referred to as “the sensible choice for democratic societies” by its advocates, and it fulfils many criteria that are subject to criticism within mainstream education. Diversity and equality are essential values within the Democratic Education context. But if all this is the case, why is there an obvious lack of diversity in Democratic Education settings?



11:50 - 12:10

Vanessa Noble

‘Against the Odds’: A reflection on institutional and Black Doctors’ narratives of achievement at the University of Natal’s medical school

In 1951, Natal saw the opening of its first medical school in Durban. Unlike other medical schools in operation in apartheid South Africa at the time, this school was established as a segregated black faculty within the province’s only existing (white) university – the University of Natal – at this time. In a context where black students experienced severely restricted access to medical schools because of racial discrimination, this medical school, located several kilometres from the university’s main campus, offered a select number of black students the opportunity to train as doctors. However, many deep-seated ambiguities and inequalities plagued the school’s establishment and operation. Furthermore, during the apartheid

period, employees and students had to contend with a negative master narrative that portrayed black South Africans', particularly Africans, as inferior, deficient or limited. Influenced by post-structuralist scholarship, this paper will consider the dominant (counter)/anti-deficit narratives of achievement that were constructed by people associated with this institution during the apartheid period. Firstly, it will consider the dominant narrative produced by certain people who worked at this institution, including deans, lecturers and publicity officers. This narrative stressed the institution's success 'against the odds' to provide the highest quality medical education in the context of racial segregation. In addition to analyzing why this narrative was promoted, it will also examine whether it worked to silence other narratives. Secondly, it will consider the dominant narrative of success 'against the odds' that was created by black doctors who studied at this institution. This section will analyse the content and some of the reasons why doctors who graduated from this school promoted this resilience-in-adversity narrative. In addition, this paper will examine how this narrative sometimes aligned with the institutional narrative, and sometimes diverged. Although the institution promoted a narrative of success based on the attainment of high standards and 'separate-but-equal' education, in reality, black doctors studied in an environment where they continued to experience racial inequalities and discrimination. This led to a high failure rate, and indeed underachievement for some. Frustration and anger led, at historical moments, to the development of strong oppositional narratives too. The positive identity-affirming and culturally empowering 'Black Consciousness'-oriented discourse, promoted by the South African Students Organisation in the late 1960s and 1970s, is a good example of this, as it worked to inspire black students and challenge the dominant narratives promoted by this institution and the state.



12:10 - 12:30

Mandisa Mbali

Ambitious heroes, passive failures and "The End of AIDS"

This paper explores an evolving global narrative of an "end of AIDS" which has been produced and reproduced in medical journals, global health policy documents, activist literature, the media and popular culture, more broadly. At the centre of this idealised narrative lie two individual figures: the heroic research scientist and/or medical specialist based in the global North; and, the responsible, self-governing, resilient African activist living with HIV. In this trope, while the ambitious doctor/scientist aims to create techno-fixes such as effective vaccines and functional cures to HIV, the openly HIV-positive activist competes for social recognition for the achievement of having overcome stigma to consistently engage in HIV prevention practices and adhere to anti-retroviral therapy. Inherent to this radiant vision of an AIDS-free future is, however, the spectre of the inverse: a failure to "end AIDS" due to a lack of scientific effort and irresponsibility on the part of people living with HIV. The structural realities affecting the advancement of AIDS-related science and the capabilities of people living with HIV to achieve reasonable sexual and reproductive health life-goals are, thereby, occluded. In particular, the persistence of AIDS is causally de-coupled from the operation of neoliberal global capital as it shapes, and is shaped by, intersecting forms of oppression. While prominent physicians and scientists from the global North have greater access to resources and scientific recognition, their African counterparts operate in under-

resourced higher-education and research institutions, where there is limited opportunity to equitably engage in internationally recognised research and professional training. Similarly, the African health professionals tasked with advancing the end of AIDS face a shortage of colleagues, underdeveloped infrastructure and limited supplies of medication. Likewise, the “passive” HIV patient who chooses to not follow medical and public health advice and who opts for privacy by not disclosing their HIV status is, in reality, often confronted with sexism, homophobia, transphobia and limited access to health care services. The overarching phenomenon of declining foreign aid for HIV prevention and treatment in Africa is also latently rendered legitimate in a context where a future scientific goal is framed as imminent, thereby rendering AIDS a vanishing global public health problem. Instead, what is called for is a rejection of notions of African scientists as inherently lacking autonomy and competence and African HIV patients as passive and irresponsible: both are neither remnants of the past nor failures blocking a utopian AIDS-free future.