



**Poverty reduction as capability  
expansion:  
Professional education and  
universities in South Africa**

Arona Dison and Rosie Vaughan



# Development Discourses: Higher Education and Poverty Reduction in South Africa

Central goals:

- to research how professional education in South African universities might contribute to poverty reduction and social transformation.
- to investigate the equity trajectory of universities and their role as 'engines of reform' in addressing the challenges of poverty and associated human development needs of South Africa, through a focus on professional education.



# Research questions

How might university transformation be understood as:

- (i) contributing to poverty reduction
- (ii) contributing to poverty reduction through expanding the *capabilities* and *functionings* of students in professional education, who in turn are:
  - (iii) able to expand the capabilities of poor and disadvantaged individuals and communities?



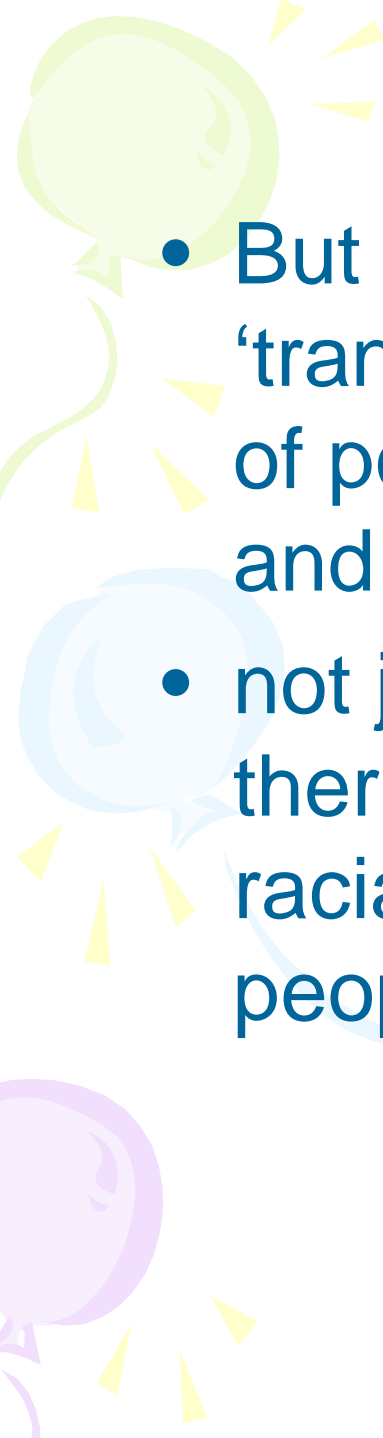
# Core concepts

- Transformation: central to political discourse in South Africa after the transition to democracy
- Poverty: multidimensional definition



# Transformation

- Redress of racial inequalities in South African society
- In HE institutions, typically interpreted as achieving proportionate numbers of students from different racial groups. Particularly in the sense of human resource development

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- But a wider interpretation of ‘transformation’ refers to the eradication of poverty, redistribution of resources and freedoms
  - not just between racial groups (i.e. that there are similar inequalities within each racial group) but greater equality for all people across society



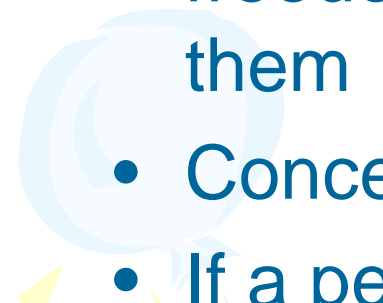
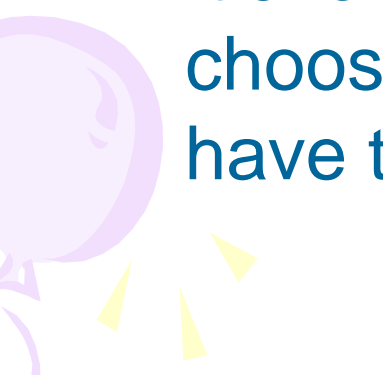
# Poverty

Two popular ways of conceptualising poverty and inequality

- Resource-based: under a dollar a day; but problems with different contexts and different individual needs
- Happiness (utility); but problems with relying exclusively on people's mental states – 'adaptive preference'



# Capability approach

- **Multidimensional** understanding of poverty
  - Evaluation of poverty centres on the level of freedom a person has to do what is valuable to them
  - Concept of ‘functionings’: beings and doings
  - If a person is able to achieve a functioning, they have the capability to do so
  - It allows for the possibility that they may not choose a certain functioning, even though they have the *capability* to achieve it
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# Poverty reduction as capability expansion

- Poverty is defined as lack of capability to achieve core functionings which are central to human wellbeing
- A professional working towards poverty reduction would therefore reflect this understanding in their work
- To what extent do Professional Education courses engender this understanding among their students?



# South African context

- Apartheid – institutionalised racial oppression, overlaid on class discrimination causing extreme inequality
- 1995 – 58% of all South Africans living in poverty (Hoogeveen and Özler, 2006)
- Deeply entrenched in all aspects of society, compounding poverty

# South Africa's racial demographics (2007)

<b>Population group</b>	<b>Africans</b>	<b>Coloureds</b>	<b>Indians</b>	<b>Whites</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Numbers (millions)</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>47.8</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>79.5%</b>	<b>8.8%</b>	<b>2.5%</b>	<b>9.5%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Badat, 2008

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# Change to democracy



- 1994 – ANC elected to government
- South African constitution enshrined (1997)
- Society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights
- In spite of significant economic growth, levels of poverty and inequality have increased since 1994

# Gini coefficient

South Africa	1:100
Brazil	1:50
UK	1:4



# Higher Education in SA

- System fragmented, differentiated according to race and ethnicity and designed to reproduce social relations
  - historically black (HBUs) and historically white universities (HWUs)
  - English and Afrikaans
  - Shift from early emphasis on equity-driven agenda to a more neo-liberal pragmatism
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- not 'sufficient contribution to public good in a broad and emancipatory sense'

(Singh, 2001)



## **Three case study sites:**

- **Stellenbosch University**
- **University of the Western Cape**
- **University of Cape Town**





# Stellenbosch University

- Historically white
- 'leading intellectual home of Afrikaaner nationalism'
- 23,000 students today
- 70% white, 13% black

# University of the Western Cape

- Historically black
- Nearly 15,000 students
- 50% coloured, 31% black, 5% white, 2% Indian



# University of Cape Town

- Historically white
- Over 21,000 students
- Black: white ratio is roughly 60:40

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# Case study departments

- Stellenbosch: Engineering and Theology
- University of the Western Cape: Law and Public Health
- University of Cape Town: Social Development

# Comprehensive Human Capabilities (Nussbaum+ Wolff and De Shalit)

1. Life
2. Bodily Health
3. Bodily Integrity
4. Senses, Imagination and Thought
5. Emotions
6. Practical Reason
7. Affiliation
8. Other Species
9. Play
10. Control over one's environment
11. Doing good to others
12. Living in a law-abiding fashion
13. Understanding the law



## **Comprehensive capabilities**

(Nussbaum & Wolf and de Shalit)

- Life
  - Bodily health
  - Emotions
  - Practical reason
  - Affiliation
- etc

## **Professional capabilities and functions**

- Change agent
  - Strong evaluator
- Etc

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# Dimensions of being a change agent

- Vision
- Professional agency
- Resilience
- Affiliation



# Vision

'you've really got to have a commitment, first of all to this country and the change that this country needs, the human change it needs. And you've got to have a heart for that'

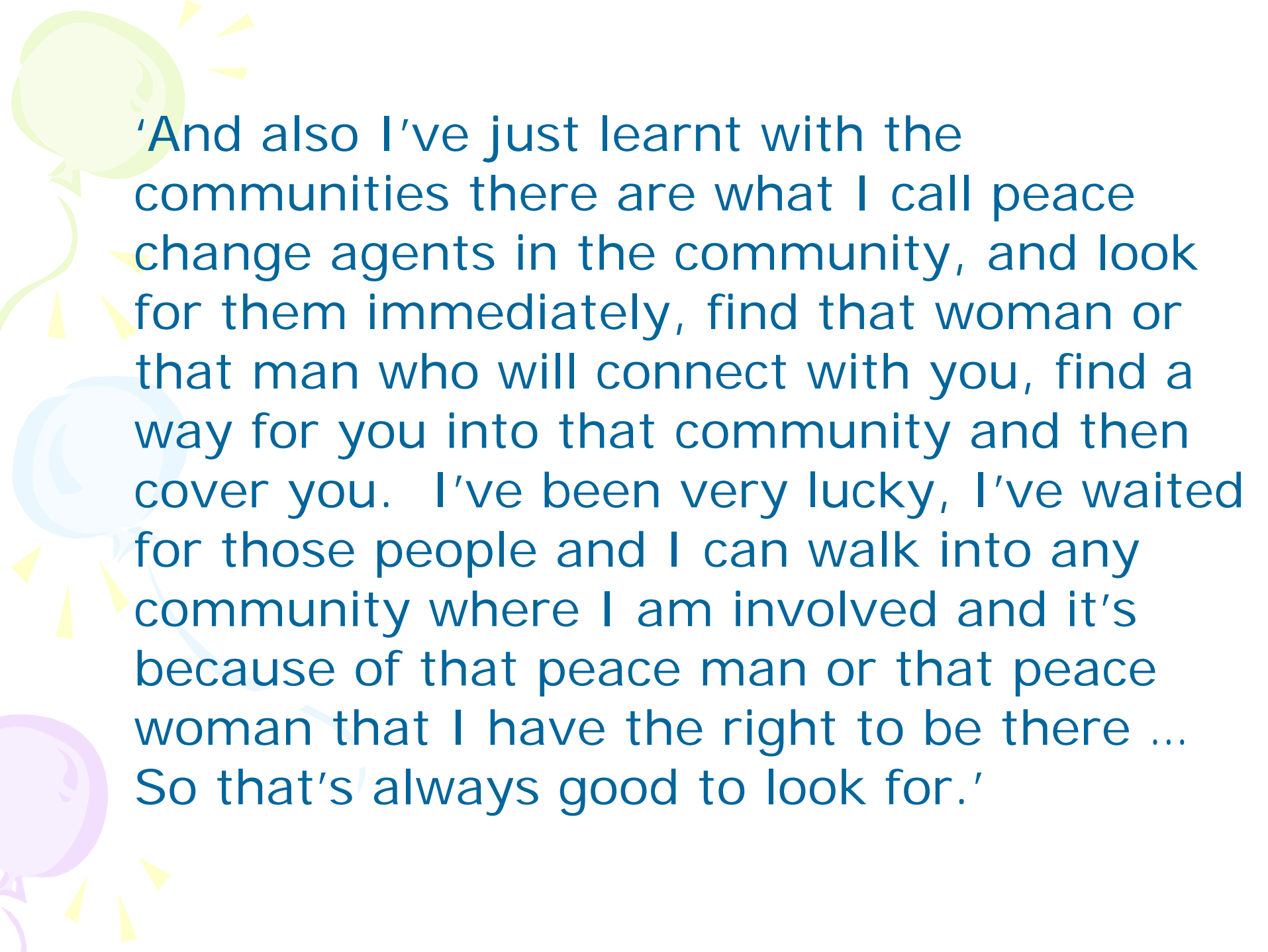
'not to be deluded about the situation and not to romanticize it, but to know that humans can change, countries can change, but you've got to be there for the long haul'





# Professional agency

'was this very very strong side of me that really wanted to see people's lives change'



'And also I've just learnt with the communities there are what I call peace change agents in the community, and look for them immediately, find that woman or that man who will connect with you, find a way for you into that community and then cover you. I've been very lucky, I've waited for those people and I can walk into any community where I am involved and it's because of that peace man or that peace woman that I have the right to be there ... So that's always good to look for.'

# Resilience

‘And you’ve got to have a heart for that ... with that commitment must come a relationship, integrity and honesty about the situation. And secondly that you’ve got to be prepared to be committed and to persevere. It’s so easy to give up, and there are reasons to give up. ... burnout is high, caseloads are incredibly high, turnover is really high, there are few social workers, too many problems. But if you stick long enough and you’re committed enough, there’s a real sense of integrity and transparency and openness to the realness of the situation. I think that’s what a social worker needs.’



# Affiliation

She refers to the 'particular community we're walking through at the moment, it's having quite a development, but we're walking that journey with them' (Anne p. 4)



# Affiliation

▶ 'And I used to go and sit at her feet and learn everything I could from her about community, about culture, about how communities perceive social workers and why ... they've got the perceptions that they have. About stokvels, burials, savings, how do you deal with grieving ...'