'Universality' and 'particularity' in student residences at Historically White Afrikaans Universities in South Africa. On the challenges of crafting inclusive diversity in organisational transformation

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Introduction

Taking the theme "narratives of achievement in African and Afroeuropean contexts" as starting point, this essay briefly presents one of the everyday life contexts that play a role in shaping narratives of achievement in South Africa: undergraduate student residences at universities. Since the transition to a democratic dispensation, the diversity of the student body of South African universities has increased considerably. This also concerns student residences, as students and university administrations alike have started to renegotiate the traditional residence cultures in the process of increasing the diversity in the residences. Not only did and does the aim consist in increasing 'diversity,' but in producing 'inclusive diversity' that enables students from all walks of life to successfully work towards what they aim to achieve. In the process, particularly students at Historically White Afrikaans Universities (HAU) face the challenge to reconsider what they regard as 'universal' and 'particular.' The essay sketches in a tentative manner how notions of the 'universal' and the 'particular' are intertwined with 'narratives of achievements' in student residences, and how both are related to the notion of 'meritocracy.'

Considering student residences

Residences not only shape the everyday life conditions under which students pursue their studies and (partially) achieve what they aim for academically. As social worlds of their own, they constitute "tiny publics" (Fine and Harrington 2004) in which students practice how to live in (small) communities and how to negotiate political, cultural, and symbolic participation (Fine 2012). Life in these residences additionally offers the individual student 'achievements' in other domains than academic studies. Using this 'opportunity,' however, is often not a choice but is enforced, as older students actively demand incoming

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students to participate in residence-related activities. Many of the residences at HAU form sharply bounded groups with their own idiocultural infrastructure and emotionally under-pinned micro-hierarchies, the latter based on the identifications *first year (student)* and *senior (student)*. Engaged in sports and cultural competitions with other residences, it is par-ticularly the *first years* who are asked to practice for and win these competitions. *Seniors* usually restrict the *first years'* interaction and participation rights and only recognise them as full members at the beginning of their second year in residence (Elliker 2015). In terms of emotional experiences as well as time and energy investments, the first-year experience is in many ways characterised as a sacrifice for the residence, a sacrifice that students only fully 'benefit' from in their second year at the residence. The first year in a residence is bound up with working towards achievements of the *residence* – achievements that will internally reflect positively on those students who have successfully competed. As the investments of the first year students are intertwined with the residence reputation, the first year students become typically more reluctant to change the residence culture as the move into a senior status, particularly with regard to changes that concern those practices which they see as generating status for the residence and status for themselves within the residence. This renders the local idiocultures of the residences relatively resilient and thus difficult to change (Elliker 2015).

Post-apartheid transformations

The residences' social organisation and the change thereof are bound up with inequalities: historically formed in a white environment, it is not only race and ethnicity, but a variety of other aspects of the students' backgrounds (such as class, gender, sexual orientations, political orientation, and rural/urban origin) that all intersect in making the residence a better fit for some and a worse for other students. They are, in other words, places in which the relationship between inequality and difference is (re)produced (Brubaker 2015, 10–47), shaped by processes of boundary-making, although not exclusively along ethnic or racial lines (Wimmer 2013). The established cultural practices and identifications ena-ble some (better) and prevent others (partially) to achieve what they aim for during their studies academically, but also what they are likely to achieve with regard to residence-re-lated activities. Students disagree, however, about the value of participating in residence activities and regarding its outcomes as achievements: while some identify with these practices and with what they learn in the process, others aim to focus on their academic studies and do not want to invest their resources in residence-related activities.

Efforts to change the residences are often geared towards creating 'inclusive diversity.' This entails the transformation of residences into spaces in which a broad range of practices and identities are accepted. This reimagination of the residences' idiocultures is confronted with a contradiction that needs to be resolved over and over again: There is a certain practical 'working consensus' needed on 'how things are done' in the residence

that allows the students to live together over an extended period of time in a relatively intimate setting. Yet 'inclusive diversity' warrants as little inequality-generating 'normativity' as possible. In other words: a critical reflection on the temporary consensus entails asking how (and what type of) students are marginalised, silenced, or excluded from a range of formal and informal situations and practices because some of their practices and self-understandings are regarded as non-normative and are thus prevented from being displayed and enacted in the residence. This is particularly relevant in residences that are historically organised in ways that demand students to participate in residence-related activities and in which the internal micro-hierarchies bestow status and privileges upon those who are considered to participate frequently and 'successfully.'

In the transformation process, the *students' everyday notions* and *perceptions* of the 'universal' and 'particular' are likely to be unsettled, whereby 'universal' refers to actions and ideas that are *perceived* as widely accepted to such an extent that they seem 'fit for everybody' or just as 'it should be' (see Perry 2007). The 'particular,' in contrast, refers to practices *perceived* as typical only for a specific (sub)set of individuals.[2] Often, the students frame those practices and understandings that they see as particular as being typical for gender-, race-, ethnicity-, or nationality-related categories of identification. Students not only vary with regard to how strongly their perceptions are structured by notions of the universal and particular, but also how 'strictly' they see some phenomena as universal and particular. Conflicts arise when 'the working consensus' of the residence-internal organisation and practices is seen by some to 'fit everybody' or 'most,' while others see this consensus as something (rather) particular.

Residences in HAU have been modelled after 'Western' (in this case mainly British) traditions of student colleges, and the university organisation, the type of scholarship practiced, and research conducted have been (and remain) embedded in a largely 'Western' framework of science (thematised and criticised by students' protests in recent years). Historically, i.e. when admission to these universities was restricted to White students, HAU and their residences were environments in which all those who were identified as faculty members and students (i.e., all *academic staff*) were White. Black Africans working at the university were employed in other, non-academic domains. Thus, while the universities were working environments to which individuals of all racial categories contributed, White students and academic staff could consider the *academic* setting paradoxically as a White setting *and* as a 'universal' setting in the sense that its 'Whiteness' was rendered partially invisible: When engaged with individuals in academic roles, all of these roles were filled with (Afrikaans-speaking) White persons. The racial boundary had been drawn 'before' these daily interactions in academia, i.e. via external closure during the

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2 'Universal' and 'particular' are not employed as analytical concepts but are understood as heuristic concepts that refer to what (some of) the students have *empirically* described as 'universal' and 'particular.'

admission process that prevented access to the tertiary education at these universities for all those not categorised as White. Identifying mainly in terms of professional academic roles in everyday activities at the university rendered the 'White,' i.e. particular Western or European character of the setting partially transparent or invisible – paradoxically so in a historic situation in which universities were part of reproducing White (Afrikaans) ethnicity in the context of a race formation in which Black Africans constituted the (disprivileged) majority and in which the *external, race-based closure* of many settings was widely institutionalised. In addition, this academic environment was and still is to some extent infused with universalistic perspectives that create an additional plausibility structure in the context of which even everyday practices that are not directly related to scholarship – e.g., life in student residences – could more easily be construed as part of a 'universal' way of doing things – albeit with local ethnic differences, as HAU and its residences were geared towards reproducing *Afrikaner* ethnicity (in contrast to the everyday culture of the English-speaking White population segment).

The transformation process that started with the admission of Black African students interrupted the established ways of identifying others: students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds were and are now reciprocally related to each other as members of the same relevant formal categories – in their academic roles as *students* and as *residence members* with the same rights and obligations. What could be rendered as non-problematic, taken-for-granted and thus partially transparent background in a culturally relatively homogenous setting is now (partially) framed as ethnoculturally or racially specific. This perception did and continues to have an unsettling effect in many ways. Inter alia, it questions the routine ways of how things are done in the residences. White students are perceived as profiting from the ethnocultural specificity of the residence practices as the knowledge they have acquired by being socialised in a White environment constitutes a biographical background for which the residences' cultures are a better fit than for students having grown up in other ethnocultural settings. In other words: the reciprocally related perspectives of students from ethnoculturally different backgrounds frame some of the practices as instances of 'transparent ethnicity' – as ethnically particular, but as an ethnic specificity that is unacknowledged or not perceived as such by many of those who engage in these practices.

Again paradoxically, the cultural specificity of these practices is not evident to all students and often only partially evident. Throughout the conflictual history of the transformation process, students at some universities initially refused to share residences with those whom they regarded as ethnoculturally and racially others – a conflict that was also fought in terms of reserving a specific ethnocultural space for themselves. Yet, students of the subsequent generations who have not been part of these conflicts often adopt a 'universalist' stance, despite being aware of the history of Apartheid segregation, the contemporary, still largely separated ways of life (as a result of this history), and the wide-spread common-sense assumptions about ethnic and cultural differences. It is,

however, only a fraction of White students that adopt universalising perspectives; many are aware of the ethnically specific character of (parts of) the residence cultures, partially being sensitised to this by the negotiations in the residences. Part of the faction that does initially adopt a partially universalising perspective does so unwittingly – partially due to, as mentioned above, being socialised in mono-ethnic communities and a largely Western education system, and partially due to the Western academic framework that implicitly provides plausibility to the assumption that the cultural references that are intertwined with dominant residence culture are a good fit for what is regarded as a scientific education that generates 'universal' knowledge. Others employ a universalist perspective tactically to preserve some of the practices the cherish, aiming to portray the residence culture as 'fit for everybody.'

A discourse framed by (Western) meritocratic thinking

It comes as no surprise that the scholarly discussion and everyday discourse in the field of education revolve around the notion of meritocracy and related concepts – in either critical or affirmative ways – since the major institutions in the field of education in South Africa have been modelled after typical Western and European ideals of education, meritocracy being a framework and belief system that has historically become firmly intertwined not only with the education system but with many societal domains (Young 1958). Despite masking the manifold inequalities that continue to structure everyday realities in education and work life and thus being more of a myth than a reality (McNamee 2018; Littler 2017), it continues to shape perspectives of 'achievement' and 'ascription' – both in the wider community as well as amongst students (Warikoo 2016). The concept can thus serve as an *empirical* concept to better understand how *the perspectives* of the students are (partially) organised. Within this framework, education is regarded as preparatory stage for the competition in adult life. The outcomes of this competition will be unequal but are regarded as morally deserving if they are based on performance, ability, and effort and not based on ascribed characteristics such as class, ethnicity, or gender. In other words, meritocracy is "a system in which rewards are based on supposedly fair measures of merit" (Warikoo 2016, 230).

Thus, students often talk about success in residence-related activities and their studies in ways that are framed by a meritocratic framework, attributing success and failure to the individual student's abilities and efforts. This meritocratic perspective is furthermore fostered by many student activities being organised in competitive form. Particularly sports practices are not only regarded as a leisurely, relaxing activity, but – in the context of the residences – as competitive practices that serve to generate 'achievements' for the residence and the participating individuals. While this meritocratic perspective seems to find resonance within the wider community, not all students share this, as it is evident at least to a faction of them – both from privileged and historically disadvantaged back-

grounds – that having grown up in historically privileged families brings along ascribed advantages. This awareness is also fostered by the fact that efforts to address these historically constituted disadvantages are partially based on ascriptive criteria in the context of affirmative action measures.

The ascriptive character of the privileged background is thematised differently and partially paradoxically: Concerning the relationship between Black students and White students – who constitute the majority of comparatively privileged students – the ascribed character is thematised in terms of ethnic particularity and the fit with regard to the residence culture. The differences amongst Black students and amongst White students – i.e., inequalities and differences *within* ethnic or racial categories – however, are often not perceived as constituting unfair advantages both by Black and White students alike (with the exception of those students who have visited elite colleges and who are perceived as having developed their own culture that sets them apart from the 'average' students). Amongst many White and Black students, these *intra*categorical differences are partially rendered transparent through a focus on ethnic identification that emphasises *inter*categorical difference and downplays *inter*categorical similarity, focussing more on *intra*categorical similarity than *intra*categorical difference. Thus, in the case of White students, the different *outcomes* of the many competitive activities they engage in *compared to other White students* – outcomes that are de facto also shaped by ascriptive characteristics – appear to many as being based on a 'meritocratic' competition, as the ethnic focus of identification renders differences of class and milieux (amongst other ascriptive criteria) at least partially transparent.

Conclusion

Residences act not only as contexts in which students pursue their academic goals. They constitute contexts in which students participate in cultural activities that are a better fit for some and less so for others, bestowing – amongst peers – more or less status and reputation on the individual student depending on the outcome of the participation. The increase in ethnic and racial diversity produces several, partially paradoxical effects: Black students perceive and problematise aspects of everyday life that (some) White students have regarded as 'universal'; i.e. practices are perceived as being shaped by an ethnic 'particularity' that remained transparent to those engaging in these practices. In a context that many students think should be a 'meritocratic' competition, this constitutes an ascribed characteristic – an unfair advantage as it privileges those who have been socialised into the corresponding ethnically specific practices. Yet, the focus on ethnic identification tends to render other, *intra*categorical differences transparent, thus masking to some extent how the participation in the residence culture is shaped by class, milieu, or gender. Those involved in the transformation process and its associated negotiations thus not only face the challenge of how to build communities that enable the creation of

a common ground between students and a type of inclusive diversity that allows students to live in ways that will contribute to their personal narratives of achievement. As shown, the perceptual intersection of 'ethnicity' and 'meritocracy' produces ambivalent effects, partially masking the many inequalities (e.g., along ethnic and other lines) that shape how successful students participate in the residences. The challenge thus also consists in how to conceive of achievement and how to create contexts that enable achievement in an environment that continues to be structured by persistent intercategorical and growing intracategorical inequalities.

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