

Special points of interest:

- * Identifying transformative pathways from precarity to capability and flourishing
- * Optentia's mentor and mentee short courses will equip you with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive
- * The capability approach places people's voices at its centre
- * Optentia's Research Indaba was an engaging, supportive, caring, and encouraging experience for all participants.

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Transformative Pathways from Precarity to Capability

Identifying transformative pathways from precarity - where individuals face uncertain, unstable, and insecure conditions - to states of capability and flourishing involves addressing various multidimensional challenges:

First, it is crucial to address economic empowerment by a) ensuring access to employment opportunities that pay a living wage (allowing individuals to meet their basic needs), and b) investing in education and vocational training to enhance capabilities, making people more adaptable and competitive in the job market, and c) improving access to financial services, to enable people to manage financial risks and invest in opportunities.

Second, it is essential to address social support and services by a) providing healthcare access; b) implementing social protection during unemployment, illness, disability, or old age, and c) strengthening community support systems and networks that provide support.

Third, it is vital to address legal and policy frameworks by a) strengthening legal frameworks to protect rights and ensure equal representation and participation in political and economic decision-making processes, and b) reforming regulations to pro-

tect workers, consumers, and the environment, promoting sustainable and equitable development.

Fourth, it is essential to address technological and environmental innovation through sustainable practices and digital inclusion divides.

Fifth, it is vital to address psychological and cultural transformation by a) cultivating mindsets focused on growth, resilience, and empathy through, and b) empower communities to identify their strengths and needs, fostering a sense of agency and participation in their development.

Last it is essential to build global cooperation and solidarity through international partnerships. This should be done by a) engaging in international partnerships to address challenges such as climate change, pandemics,

and economic inequality, and b) promoting the sharing of knowledge, technologies, and resources across borders to support mutual growth and capability enhancement.

For Optentia, the research implications of these interventions involve examining strategies for creating living-wage jobs, enhancing education and vocational capability development, devising healthcare delivery models for underserved areas, evaluating social protection programs to propose improvements, exploring community support mechanisms for potential strengthening, analysing reforms for sustainable development, investigating the nexus of technology, environment, and society for sustainable practices, and studying cultural and psychological factors affecting community development.

**ARE YOU FOCUSED
ON WHAT REALLY
MATTERS?**

Performance of Optentia

A total of 41 permanent staff members, 82 Master's students, and 43 PhD students participate in Optentia. From January 2024 to May 2024, eight PhD and 12 Master's students completed their studies. One master's and one PhD candidate submitted their dissertations and theses for examination in March 2024. Optentia researchers have published 67.40 peer-reviewed articles, peer-reviewed chapters in books, and peer-reviewed conference papers during 2023.

Optentia slightly adapted the names of some of its programs. The names are: Human Flourishing in Institutions; Strengths-based Studies and Interventions; Technology and Capability; Ageing and Generational Dynamics; Inclusion and Decolonial Praxis, and Behavioural Risk Work. Optentia



"Optentia hosted 11 international professors in 2023, while 12 Optentia participants visited foreign countries."

hosted 11 international professors in 2023, while 12 Optentia participants visited foreign countries.

We look forward maintaining the productivity of the entity in 2024!

The Optentia Scorecard *by* Prof. Ian Rothmann

Output	2022	2023	2024
Peer-reviewed article equivalents	98.09*	67.40*	22.77
Papers: Conferences	9	27	-
Participating Master's students	34	63	82
Completed Master's students	23	5	12
Participating PhD students	52	50	43
Completed PhD students	6	10	8
Post-doctoral fellows	1	2	0
Number of workshops presented	10	19	3
Number of workshop participants	250	619 (222)	90

Note: Statistics on 22 March 2024

* Not audited

Capability Development at Optentia

Optentia has presented various webinars and programs to build the competencies of participants from February to March 2024:

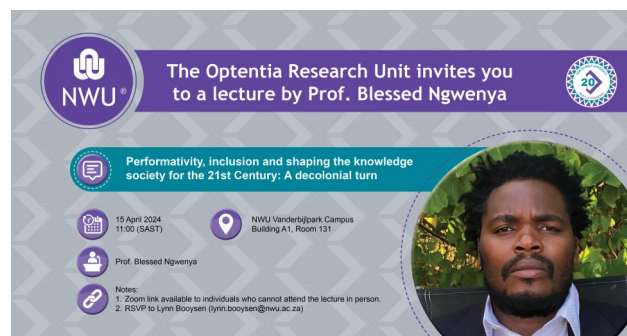
- Symposium of education and unemployment (February 2024 - Prof. Ian Rothmann and team)
- POP 2.0: Embracing the Technological Revolution (Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl).
- Positive Psychological Intervention Design (Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl).

The following workshops will be presented in April and May 2024:

- Technology, Humanity, and the Ethical Compass (Prof. Olya Kudina, Prof. Aman Dhir, Prof. Shirley Chen, Prof. Sufen Chen, Dr Lance Bunt and Prof. Japie Greeff - 4 April 2024).
- Discovery Delight: Socializing the Scientific Way (Optentia leaders - 11 April 2024).



- Performativity, inclusion, and decoloniality (15 April 2024 - Prof. Blessed Ngwenya).
- The Qualitative Research Festival (3-6 September 2024)



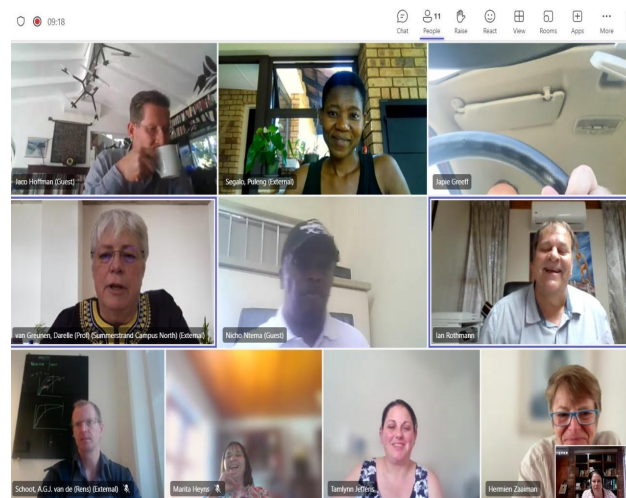
"Optentia organised various cutting-edge workshops and webinars."

Optentia Advisory Committee Meeting

The Optentia Advisory Committee met during February 2024. The tasks of the Committee are as follows:

- Guiding and advising Optentia on research or strategic issues.
- Leveraging networks to facilitate networking and partnerships.
- Advising in their areas of expertise.
- Introducing Optentia in public arenas.

Thank you to the Advisory Committee for making time available for this important meeting!



Advisory committee and Optentia members in discussion during the Advisory Committee meeting

Academic Mentor and Mentee Short Courses Launched

Are you in the academic environment and interested in participating as either a mentor or a mentee but unsure of where to begin? Look no further! Whether you're seeking guidance or eager to share your expertise, our structured curriculum will equip you with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in the dynamic realm of mentorship. Participants will gain valuable insights into the art and science of mentorship. You'll learn effective communication strategies, how to set and achieve meaningful goals, and best practices for building lasting mentor-mentee relationships. Click [here](#) to register for the academic mentoring short course. Click [here](#) to register for the academic mentee short course.

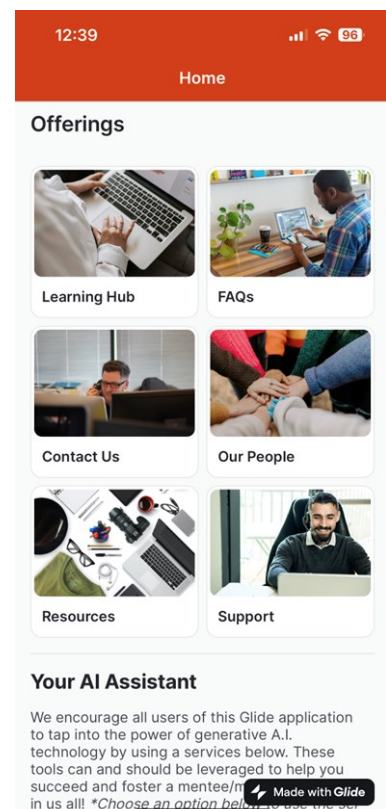
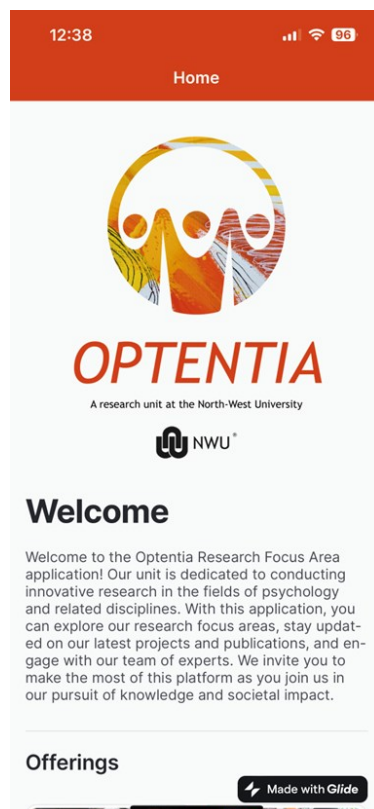
"Participants will gain valuable insights into the art and science of mentorship."



Prof. Ian Rothmann, Kele Ramagaga, and Dr Neil Barnard

Access to the Short Courses for Mentors and Mentees

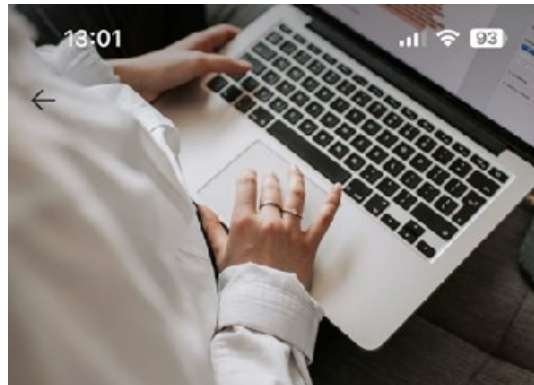
1. Go to www.optentia.co.za
2. Click on Education
3. Select Registered Short Courses
4. Find the Short Courses for Mentors and Mentees
5. Access the Short Courses via the Optentia Glide homepage (<https://optentia.glide.page>). You will need a password to access the Short Courses.



About the Academic Mentoring Short Course

The Academic Mentoring Program is done over 40 hours and consists of the following study units:

1. Study unit 1: The academic environment: Academic work, challenges, values and success
2. Study unit 2: Capabilities and functionings of academic workers: From languishing to flourishing and mattering
3. Study unit 3: Academic mentoring: The necessities
4. Study unit 4: Engaging in conversations: For better or for worse?
5. Study unit 5: Mentorship: Towards a model of change management



Learning Hub



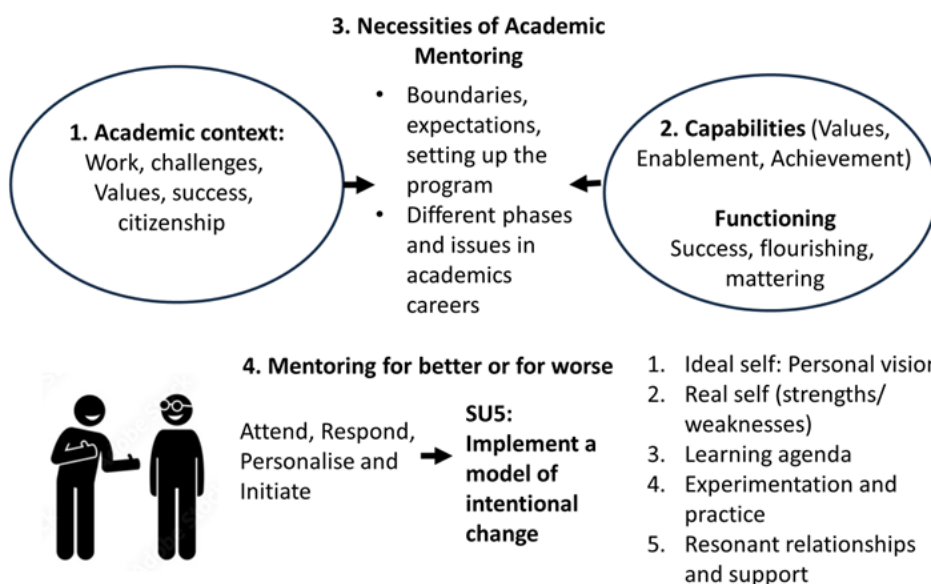
Academic Mentoring
Short Course 1



Being a Successful Academic Mentee
Short Course 2

"The Academic Mentoring Program is done over 40 hours."

Academic Mentors: Course



Symposium on Unemployment and Education by Prof. Ian Rothmann

On 20 February 2024, five Optentia members, namely Prof. Ian Rothmann, Prof. Jaco Hoffman, Prof. Vera Roos, Prof. Japie Greeff, and Prof. Roland Blonk, attended a symposium on unemployment and education in Hermanus (Western Cape). The symposium, organised by community members, was attended by various role players (community, business, and schools) in Hermanus. Prof. Ian Rothmann challenged the participants to answer two questions, namely: a) Are institutions successful in supporting the achievement of human flourishing? b) Do we consider the capabilities (values, enablement and achievements) of people? He argued that the capability approach places people's voices at its centre and seeks to listen carefully to their stories, hopes for and experiences of education, training, and work, and



Prof. Jaco Hoffman, Prof. Vera Roos, Prof. Japie Greeff, Prof. Roland Blonk and Prof. Ian Rothmann

“... the capability approach places people's voices at its centre...”

aspirations for their future lives. Prof. Roland Blonk identified three factors as crucial in dealing with unemployment: a) Motivation and self-efficacy of unemployed people. b) The quality of professional guidance unemployed people receive. c) Em-

player values and support. Optentia hopes to become involved in future research to counter unemployment in the Hermanus district. Watch an interview about dealing with unemployment [here](#).



Members of the Hermanus Community and Optentia Research Leaders at the Symposium on Education and Unemployment

Master's Research Retreat *by* Dr Neil Barnard

Over a transformative weekend, Dr Neil Barnard hosted a master's research retreat at the Small Lapa on the North-West University, Vanderbijlpark Campus. The retreat aimed at assisting Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management master's students in their research journeys. The tranquil environment of the Small Lapa facilitated deep reflection and intellectual engagement among the master's students and facilitators.

The retreat commenced on Friday evening with a dinner, setting the stage for participants to settle in, start networking, and begin adopting a research mindset. This initial gathering was crucial in laying the foundation for the weekend's activities, encouraging students to open up to the possibilities ahead.

Saturday's sessions were designed to prompt profound introspection among the attendees. The day began with exercises aimed at helping students reflect on their 'why' and work values, including their reasons for pursuing their respective fields, enrolling in their courses, and their aspirations within their professional arenas. This reflective process was intended to help them align their research endeavours with their personal visions and work values.

Following these reflective sessions, the respected speakers, including Prof. Ian Rothmann, Prof. Roland Blonk, Dr Lynelle Coxen, and Dr Lance Bunt, presented on topics ranging from building a researcher's identity in Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management to combatting unemployment, succeed-



Back (left to right): Innocentia Mphuti, Boitumelo Mereohle, Bongu Mngomezulu, Maele Seitshiro, Sumé van Deventer, Shingairai Mabwe, Tshegofatso Leballo, Nicole van den Berg, and Keletso Mokete.
Front (left to right): Aviwe Ntloko and Jane Hlangbebi.

ing in master's research, and exploring innovative research tools. These presentations provided valuable insights and spurred the students to revisit their morning reflections, incorporating their learnings to brainstorm potential research topics.

Facilitators engaged with the students, offering insights and feedback on their ideas. This collaborative environment allowed students to refine their research topics, which they then presented to the facilitators for further feedback and reflection points. This feedback aimed to strengthen their research ideas to be taken to their research supervisors, marking the beginning of their research journey.

The retreat concluded on Sunday with a group reflection session. Students shared their learnings and provided feedback on the weekend's activities and their learning. This final gathering underscored the retreat's impact on their academic and professional development, ensuring that the students left with a renewed sense of purpose and direction for their research projects.

As Dr Neil Barnard reflects on the weekend, plans are already underway for future initiatives aimed at continuing to support the academic and professional advancement of master's students.

Thank you to Optentia Research Unit and The School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management for making the retreat possible, and especially to the following people:

- Mrs. Zama Chaacha
- Dr Thapelo Chaacha
- Ms. Lynn Booysen
- Dr Jacqueline Bosman
- Prof. Marius Stander
- Dr Queen Usadolo
- Prof. Ian Rothmann
- Prof. Roland Blonk
- Dr Lynelle Coxen
- Dr Lance Bunt

"... students left with a renewed sense of purpose and direction for their research projects."

Optentia's Research Indaba *by* Prof. Ian Rothmann

The Optentia Research Unit, in association with Prof. Rens van de Schoot and Prof. Duco Veen of the Department of Methodology and Statistics at Utrecht University, recently hosted a Research Indaba in Cape Town. Participants indicated that the following aspects surprised them during the Indaba:

- Opportunities for learning from others. The Research Indaba was an engaging, supportive, caring, and encouraging experience for all participants. A wealth of knowledge was available in one room; there was a hunger for knowledge, and participants were eager to share their expertise.
- Diverse perspectives from a variety of backgrounds. A surprising number of perspectives and specialisations were represented.

"A wealth of knowledge was available in one room; there was a hunger for knowledge, and participants were eager to share their expertise."

learning
thought provoking
mindblowing
appropriate
fascinating
enlightening
brilliant
exciting
stimulating
good
good spirit
team
informative
fantastic
amazing
nice
collaborative
triggering
expansion
community
inspiring
interesting
ai ish enlightening
broadened horizon

- Using artificial intelligence (AI) in teaching/learning and research. Initially, participants were unaware of the possibilities of embracing artificial intelligence in their educational and research roles. The number of AI tools

and the different uses of large learning models surprised participants. It was valuable for participants to discuss the ethics of AI and how to empower students to use it responsibly.



Participants in the Optentia Research Indaba. Different disciplines, e.g. journalism, physiology, psychology, physiology, statistics, and computer studies were represented in the Research Indaba

Learning Experiences at the Optentia Research Indaba

Participants at the Optentia Research Indaba reported the following learning experiences:

- Established and emerging researchers need to engage more.
- Not knowing is okay if you acknowledge it and are willing to learn and equip yourself.
- Help is available to learn more about (artificial intelligence (AI) and statistical packages.
- Artificial intelligence is an academic's friend. Many different AI tools are available. AI can be used effectively in research. Working smarter is not cheating.
- Opportunities for collaboration are available across disciplinary boundaries. You are not alone in learning more about AI.
- Consider the environmental impact of using AI.
- ASReview is an invaluable tool for researchers.
- Ethics matter.
- Students know a lot about AI.



Dr Lance Bunt working with participants on the ethics of artificial intelligence at the Optentia Research Indaba

“Established and emerging researchers need to engage more.”



Participants at the Optentia Research Indaba

Prof. Norman Duncan: Inspirational Leader and Mentor

In October 2022, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, appointed Prof. Duncan as the Independent Assessor to investigate the affairs of the Central University of Technology (CUT). He completed and submitted his assessment report to the Department of Higher Education and Training in January 2023. The report was subsequently submitted to the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation. Several newspapers reported on the outcome of the assessment.

In January 2023, Prof. Duncan commenced his term as Editor-in-Chief of the Psychological Society of South Africa's flagship journal, the South African Journal of Psychology (SAJP). Four issues of the SAJP were published following the commencement of his term as Editor-in-Chief. In October 2023, he convened and chaired a symposium, titled Writing and Re-



Prof. Jaco Hoffman, Prof. Norman Duncan and Prof. Vera Roos

viewing for Publication, at the 27th Annual Congress of Psychology organised by the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA). During 2023, Prof. Duncan also chaired the Council on Higher Education's Institutional Audits Panel for the University of Zululand.

He is currently co-editing a community psychology volume

together with Prof. Vera Roos (North-West University) and Prof. Jace Pillay (University of Johannesburg). The volume, provisionally titled Community Psychology: Global crises, local realities, and action, is scheduled to be published by Juta at the end of 2024.

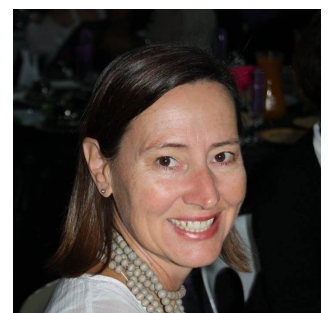
Watch an interview with Prof. Duncan [here](#).

"In January 2023, Prof. Duncan commenced his term as Editor-in-Chief of the South African Journal of Psychology."

My PhD Journey by Mari Ford

I never expected my PhD journey to be so positive, rewarding and fulfilling. I have often wished that I had done it earlier in my academic career, as many things about my job would have been easier. There are several reasons for my positive experience. Firstly, I was mentally and emotionally ready for the journey and I had the support of all my family, friends, colleagues and my institution. Secondly, I chose exactly the right university and the right research unit. NWU provided me with a bursary to cover my tuition fees, and the administrative process were smooth and simple. Optentia provided me with an

innovative and enabling learning environment, starting with the Short Learning Program in Research Design and continuing with the workshops and presentations that challenged me to broaden my research knowledge and interests. I felt included and engaged in a wider academic discourse, to which I had not before had access. Finally, I chose exactly the right promoter. Prof. Rothmann was with me for every step of this journey, providing encouragement, guidance, mentoring, coaching and pushing when I needed it. I could not have asked for a better promoter regarding his values, expe-



Dr Mari Ford

rience, integrity, knowledge, dedication and work ethic. Thank you to everyone at Optentia, to Lynn and all the colleagues who welcomed me on my visits, and especially to Prof. Rothmann.

Mmogo-method Presentation at University of Western Cape

Dr Tracy Adonis from the University of the Western Cape (UWC) invited Vera Roos to present a two-day workshop on 28 and 29 November 2023 in collaboration with Prof. Ansie Kitching. The aim of the workshop was twofold: (1) to use the visual data-collection method to make visible to the attendees what they value; and, (2) to apply the method in its four phases. The workshop was attended by seven students registered for a Master's in Research Psychology in the Faculty of Health Science, the Program coordinator of the Master's Research program, and the Deputy-Dean Community Engagement.

The invitation to present the workshop was to equip researchers to apply the Mmogo-method to research and in projects focusing on enhancing community-university partnerships.

The workshop attendees actively engaged in the experiential process; and when reflecting on the exercise, they reported that they felt safe to share with the group and able to apply the method based on the knowledge and skills they gained. The method enables a deeper understanding of topics related to community-based research, gives an opportunity for self-reflection, but also that due to its projective nature, can go deep which requires researchers to be attentive and present in the research context.



From left to right: Firdouza Waggie; Ansie Kitching; Casey Botha; Jenna Chetty; Savannah Brognieri; Vera Roos; Nelly Mamabolo; Maria Florence; Khelsey Fraser; Amy-Jean Viljoen; Nicole Thomas



A participant valuing her mother and their relationship



The struggle to find a way out of the well of life

"The invitation aimed to equip researchers to apply the Mmogo-method to research and in projects focusing on enhancing community-university partnerships."

Book Proposal on Work Capabilities: Cambridge University Press

A proposal for a peer-reviewed handbook on work capabilities has recently been accepted by Cambridge University Press. Prof. Jac van der Klink (an extraordinary professor in the Optentia Research Unit) and Prof. Ian Rothmann are the editors of the book. The title of the book is: "The added value of the capability model for well-being at work."

The rationale for a new book on work capabilities, grounded in the capability approach of Amartya Sen, is multifaceted and compelling. This book will provide a normative framework that addresses the profound implications of work in contemporary society, highlighting its pivotal role in fostering human development, social justice, and individual flourishing.

The capability approach offers a normative perspective beyond traditional economic metrics like income or gross domestic product. This approach emphasises the significance of focusing on what individuals are able to do and be rather than merely what they have. By centering on capabilities, it acknowledges the intrinsic value of every person's potential and the importance of providing equal opportunities for individuals to flourish. In this book, we will apply this to work.

The book will delve into the values inherent in the capability approach, emphasising the humanistic and ethical dimensions. Models and theories of Occupational Medicine, Occupational Health Psychology, and Management do not sufficiently recognise the importance of values for individuals and organisations. Additionally, contextual factors that influence an individual's



Dr Neil Barnard, Prof. Jac van der Klink and Prof. Ian Rothmann in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands working on a book proposal for Cambridge University Press

ability to work are not sufficiently recognised. The book explores the notion that work should not be reduced to a means of survival but rather seen as a means of self-expression, self-realisation, and fulfilling one's values. Work would be viewed as a means to enable individuals to lead lives they have reason to value.

The book will investigate how the capability approach assesses work's role in enabling individuals to convert resources and opportunities into valuable functioning. It will explore the idea that work should empower people to achieve their life goals materially and in terms of personal development. This involves examining the quality of work, access to education and skills, and removing barriers that hinder individuals from realising their full potential. The role of human resource management and management are discussed in detail.

One of the central tenets of the capability approach is the pursuit of social justice. We argue that work should not perpetuate inequalities but contribute to reducing disparities and fostering a more equitable society. The book offers a framework for understanding the capabilities and functioning of people in dif-

ferent contexts. It will explore how different policies and practices in the workplace, education, and social support systems can promote social justice and ensure that work opportunities are accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic background, gender, or other dimensions of diversity.

Using the capability approach, we argue that well-being cannot be universally defined or imposed from external sources but must be understood within different communities' specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. The book offers an invaluable decolonisation perspective as it allows marginalised or colonised groups to define their well-being aspirations and priorities rather than have external values imposed upon them.

"The capability approach offers a normative perspective beyond traditional economic metrics."

Collaboration with Sweden: Prof. Blessed Ngwenya

Discussions of Africa are always located in the debris left by Euro-modernity. Consequently, Africa has always found itself in a dilemma as a consequence of several developments within Euro-modernity and its divergent lines that have to do with two basic concepts. On the one hand is how people outside Africa view and study Africa. On the other hand, is how Africans view and study themselves (Mudimbe 1998; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; Magubane 1996; Allen 2012; Wolf 1982) have led the path in questioning the construction of Africa through universalising Euro-modernity metrics and its pathologizing conceptual systems. Mudimbe (1998) calls these restrictive and universalising topographies of Euro-modernity the 'Idea of Africa' because they are an offshoot of false Western constructs of Africa which are created from without. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ngqulunga extend the idea by calling for an 'African Idea' instead (2022). This idea, they posit, should be born out of the need for an epistemological re-interpretation that disrupts the monologic Westcentric epistemological traditions, and it must be an internally derived African-centred view of Africa.

In response to these conversations, Optentia (North-West University) and Health Studies department (Blekinge Institute of Technology), embarked on a project that seeks to conceptualize Africa as both a theoretical category and a prism to examine itself and the contemporary world, particularly Europe and North America. In January 2024 a collaborative project under this umbrella on understanding Diver-

sity, Equity and Inclusion in Swedish Nursing Education was embarked on. Although there is much discussion about the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in nursing education, to integrate DEI is a long process which requires persistence, but it is also important to return the gaze by positioning Europe as a raw data mine and object of inquiry. The key objective is to shift the geography of reason by proposing Europe as a space and axis to locate and make sense of socio-economic, political, and cultural human experience in the world in general and Africa in particular. This epistemic disobedience posture emanates from the position that, once the epistemic location shifts, the questions, theoretical inclinations and methodological orientations change together with their relevance and importance. This leads to a reconstruction and a new vision of the world and in the process the epistemological dependency on Europe is arrested by creating a dialogue between knowledges, an ecology of knowledges. Thus, this project focuses on students' and lecturers' perspectives and the relationships between ways of know-



Prof. Blessed Ngwenya

ing and ways of being in pursuit of continuing institutional effort needed to reformulate the fundamental premises of diversity, equity and inclusion in nursing education. The influence of the individual's positionality needs to be addressed to be aware of personal biases and gaps in relation to knowledge and attitudes in connection to DEI. Over 30 in-depth interviews with students and lecturers have been conducted and questionnaires administered to 58 students. The project is also being extended to Linnaeus University where some preliminary discussions on future collaborations were conducted with Prof. Eleonor Marcussen and with Prof. Stefan Amirell, the director of the Centre for Concurrences in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies at Linnaeus University.

"The influence of the individual's positionality needs to be addressed to be aware of personal biases and gaps ..."



Prof. Eleonor Marcussen, Prof. Blessed Ngwenya and Prof. Stefan Amirell

News: Strengths-based Studies and Interventions

Excelling at what one is doing, is assumed to be easier if one can draw on one's natural capacities while executing tasks. This is so because using one's strengths is energizing and motivating.

The strengths-based approach originates from a positive psychology perspective which serves to compliment the traditional deficit approach. Theoretical work proposes that the active use of strengths can have a buffering effect against the psychological impact of negative experiences if applied correctly and helps people to thrive rather than simply survive.

Over time, the strengths movement have been influenced by three main streams of thought which mutually influenced each other and dramatically expanded the spectrum of research that took place. Researchers also began to examine strengths not only on an individual level, but also within teams, systemically marginalised groups, communities, and in context with their environments.

Despite initial scepticism, a growing body of strengths-based research, including intervention- and longitudinal studies, shows substantial evidence for its effectiveness and broad applicability (see reviews by Ghielen et al., 2018; Miglianico et al., 2021 and Wanamaker et al., 2018 for interesting findings in different research contexts).

Although a few researchers on the African continent are already adding valuable insights, a more clearly distinguishable African footprint needs to be established. Multidisciplinary research projects are particularly warranted to understand strengths-use within the context

of social, economic, political, and historical realities in South Africa. More community-engaged research as well as with marginalised youth and children in distress are critical. Qualitative research approaches offer particularly useful tools to conduct high-quality research within these contexts.

The insights of Prof. Linda Liebenberg, who was recently appointed as extra-ordinary research professor in the program, are likely to be invaluable in furthering our research goals. Prof. Liebenberg (Dalhousie University, Canada) is a leading researcher, evaluator, and consultant in the field of resilience and community development, with a core interest in children and youth with complex needs. Her research includes for example participatory image-based methods, sophisticated longitudinal quantitative designs, and the design of measurement instruments.

Members of the Strengths-Based Studies and Interventions program of Optentia also intends to host a Qualitative Research Festival (QRF) from 3-6 September in 2024. This event will be a team effort involving international and local experts from a variety of academic backgrounds who will share their expertise with other research-oriented academics and practitioners during this festival. The emphasis will be on practical skills acquired through workshops to enhance qualitative research expertise and confidence. A wide variety of qualitative research methods, techniques, tools, and related topics will be presented to interested parties during this festival. Examples include workshops on



Prof. Marita Heyns

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, how to undertake community-based research, decolonising research and what it means for the global research community, employment of a variety of technological tools and participatory image-based methods - including photovoice, ethical considerations when employing visual methods of data collection, training in atlas ti, and more. Additionally, one of many highlights of the festival is a joint workshop presented by Prof. Wekerle (McMaster University, Canada) and Prof. Linda Theron (University of Pretoria) on submission to Elsevier journals (Child Abuse & Neglect; Child Protection & Practice). There will also be an opportunity to meet Prof. Wekerle, who is also the editor in chief at Elsevier, on the possibility of a special edition of Child Abuse & Neglect. Save the date - 3-6 September - for Optentia welcomes academics, researchers, and practitioners from both the public and private sector to celebrate and share expertise during this festival. More news will follow in due course.

"... the strengths movement have been influenced by three main streams of thought which mutually influenced each other."

Symposium: Technology, Humanity and the Ethical Compass

Technology, Humanity, and the Ethical Compass: Charting the Course of Capability Development.

Aim of the Symposium

The symposium aims to chart a course for the future of capability development that is ethically grounded, human-centric, and socially responsible, fostering a dialogue among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers from diverse fields to collaborate towards a more equitable and humane technological future. The following topics will be presented:

- Topic 1: AI as a mediator of human values: A dynamic sociotechnical systems perspective (Prof. Olya Kudina)
- Topic 2: Algorithmic Appreciation, aversion, and algoactivism: Where we are now and where we are heading (Prof. Aman Dhir)
- Topic 3: Navigating knowledge frontiers: Digital storytelling for critical thinking and emotional learning (Prof. Shirley Chen)
- Topic 4: Tactile experience in merged reality for learning (Prof. Sufen Chen)
- Topic 5: Crossing wires: The 'techtures' that enable us (Dr Lance Bunt)
- Topic 6: New approach to counselling and psychological service: Metaverse counselling (Prof. Sang Min Lee)
- Topic 7: Technology-enabled decolonial practice. A state of translation (Prof. Japie Greeff).
- Integration and conclusion.

Register for the symposium [here](https://bit.ly/AI_Symposium).



DATE: 4 April 2024
TIME: 10:00 - 13:30
PLACE: North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, PC-C1-135 (in person) or YouTube (online)
REGISTRATION: https://bit.ly/AI_Symposium
CONTACT PERSON: Lynn Booysse: lynn.booysse@nwu.ac.za



Prof. Japie Greeff, Prof. Song Min Lee, Prof. Sufen Chen, Dr Lance Bunt, Prof. Olya Kudina, Prof. Shirley Chen and Prof. Aman Dhir



"The symposium aims to chart a course for the future of capability development."

Embracing New Horizons *by* Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

As I stand at the threshold of a new chapter in my career journey, I can't help but reflect on the path that led me here. It's a journey marked by moments of doubt, triumphs, cherished friendships, and profound personal growth. Today, with a mix of nostalgia and anticipation, and a bit of anxiety, I bid farewell to academia - a place that's been my home for many years.

It feels like just yesterday when I nervously stumbled through my first ever presentation at a SIOPSA conference. "I'm scared Marius, what if I make an idiot out of myself?" I nervously confided to my supervising psychologist. His response, though laced with humour, held a nugget of truth: "Don't worry, that ship sailed a long time ago." With his gentle push, I found my footing and embarked on a journey that would shape my professional identity.

Academia quickly became more than just a career path to me; it became a calling. I felt like I was placed on earth to be an academic! Over the last 16 years, academia provided me with the so many wonderful opportunities to contribute to the advancement of my tiny discipline. I've been fortunate to contribute to over 100 manuscripts to academic journals and books, to lead two prestigious journals as co-editor-in-chief, and breaking barriers as the youngest associate professor at UNISA and youngest president of the SIOPSA. Additionally, it allowed me to serve on various governmental bodies that influenced the scope of practice of my profession and to receive an extraordinary professorship with Optentia, a lifelong honorary



Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

membership of SIOPSA and various other professional accolades for the contributions I've made to my field. It also allowed me to consult for several Fortune 500 companies and most importantly... it provided me with the privilege to play a small part in the personal and professional development of the students I was lucky enough to meet along the way. I have been so lucky to have had the opportunity to fully explore every facet of an (pragma) academic career.

The accolades and achievements aside, what truly fuelled my passion were the moments of mentorship, the fruitful and sometimes fiery exchange of ideas, and the opportunity to meet and work with amazing people. Academia helped me build lasting friendships across the ocean with extraordinary people like Leon de Beer, Jeff Klibert, Rebecca Shankland, Matt Cole, Gert Roodt, Jackie Stavros, Marisa Salanova, Jessica van Wingerden, Leoni van der Vaart, and Zelda di Blasi. It also gave me mentors like Ian Rothmann, Mari-

us Stander, Bryan Dik, Lene Jorgensen, Mark van Vuuren, and Tanya Bondarouk who unconditionally invested in my personal development, provided unwavering support and helped me find a tribe that embraced my endeavours and supported many of my (sometimes unrealistic) ideas! And even more importantly, it let me meet and learn from amazing students like Noah Custers, Max Obers, and Menno Cornelisse. It also allowed me to see beautiful parts of the world, which I never imagined I would be able to see, like Ian Rothmann taking me on my first trip outside of my country to Swakopmund in Namibia and seeing geysers in Iceland during my last conference in Reykjavik.

"With his gentle push, I found my footing and embarked on a journey that would shape my professional identity ..."

Embracing New Horizons (continued)

But like any relationship, academia has had challenges that etched away at the meaning I attached to and derived from academic work over the last few years. The analogy of an anxious-avoidant relationship resonates deeply - the longing for validation, met with moments of detachment. Last September's emergency operation and almost passing away served as a wake-up call, a poignant reminder as to the importance of pursuing meaningful life and career experiences. It prompted me to reevaluate my personal priorities and aspirations.

And so, with a heart full of gratitude and a sense of purpose, I would like to share (if only to make this more tangible and real to myself) my decision to close the door of my academic career and to explore a new career path. While the specifics of my next venture may still be a bit uncertain, my heart is pulling me back to management consulting - a place where I can do something meaningful that makes a contribution, and that embodies the values of the disciplines I hold so dear: Positive Psychology and Data Science. To all who have supported me along this journey -

mentors, colleagues, friends - I extend my deepest gratitude. Your guidance, encouragement, and unwavering belief in my potential have shaped me in ways I can never fully express. As I take this first step into the unknown, I carry with me the lessons learned, the memories shared, and the invaluable connections forged.

"The analogy of an anxious-avoidant relationship resonates deeply."

New Optentia Member: Lawrence Mamabolo

Mr Lawrence Lekau Mamabolo was born and raised on the outskirts of Pretoria in a place called Winterveld. After completing his Matric he joined the SA Navy as an engine room attendant where he worked for 3 years. He then joined Correctional Services as a Case Officer where he completed his undergraduate and honours

studies in Psychology. After a 9-year stint at Correctional Services he joined private sector then moved to NGO sector where he completed his MA Studies in Psychology. He joined NWU in February 2023 working at VC Psychology Department. He describes himself as loving respectful and down to earth.



Lawrence Mamabolo

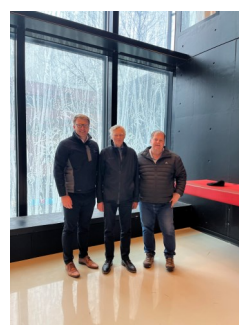
Visit to Academics in the Netherlands

Prof. Ian Rothmann and Dr Neil Barnard visited the Netherlands during February 2024. They met Prof. Andries Baart in Utrecht. They had insightful discussions with Prof. Baart.

Later the day, they had lunch with Prof. Ype Poortinga, a renowned cross-cultural psychologist and emeritus professor of Tilburg University. We hope to welcome both Prof. Baart and Prof. Poortinga in South Africa during 2024.



Dr Neil Barnard, Prof. Ian Rothmann and Prof. Andries Baart



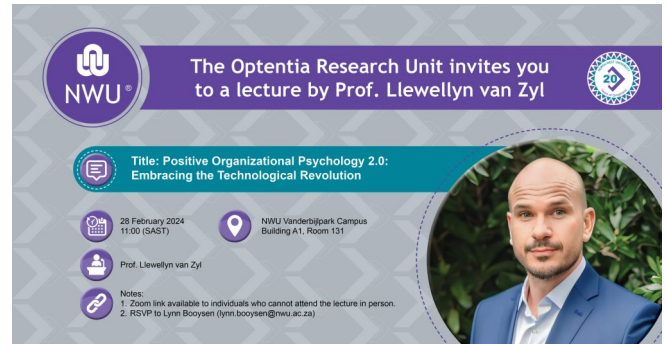
Dr Neil Barnard, Prof. Ype Poortinga and Prof. Ian Rothmann

Important Workshops Presented by Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl presented a one-day workshop on positive psychological interventions on 29 February 2024. The workshop was attended by 40 Honours students, practitioners and staff members. In the realm of personal and professional growth, Positive Psychological Interventions (PPIs) stand out as transformative tools designed to enhance well-being and leverage one's inherent strengths for a more fulfilling life. These interventions, rooted in positive psychology, offer varied approaches to foster innovation and financial success. Whether through gratitude exercises, group happiness training, or strengths-based coaching, PPIs aim to cultivate positive experiences, encourage signature strengths, and promote healthier lifestyles. However, despite their potential, the effectiveness of PPIs often falls short in real-world applications, raising questions about their practical impact and the conditions under which they can truly thrive. This paradox highlights the need for a deeper understanding and refinement of these interventions to unlock their full promise.

“... the effectiveness of PPIs often falls short in real-world applications...”

Prof. van Zyl also presented a lecture on Positive Organisational Psychology (POP). He pointed out that POP is evolving into an exciting new phase, dubbed POP 2.0, reflecting significant strides in understanding and enhancing workplace well-being and performance. This evolution marks a shift towards incorporating advanced technologies like AI, machine learning, and big data analytics, alongside traditional psychological principles, to tackle the complexities of organisational behaviour. POP 2.0



NWU® The Optentia Research Unit invites you to a lecture by Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

Title: Positive Organizational Psychology 2.0: Embracing the Technological Revolution

28 February 2024
11:00 (SAST)

Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

Notes:
1. Zoom link available to individuals who cannot attend the lecture in person.
2. RSVP to Lynn Booysen (lynn.booysen@nwu.ac.za)

NWU Vanderbijlpark Campus
Building A11, Room 131



NWU® The Optentia Research Unit invites you to a workshop by Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl

Positive Psychological Intervention Design: A Practical Guide to Developing Impactful Interventions

29 February 2024
08:30 - 16:00 (SAST)

North-West University, Vanderbijlpark,
Building A13, Room 13

Notes:
• Registration closes: 13 February 2024 @ 12:00 (no late registrations can be accepted)
• Pre-Work: After registration, you will get an email with instructions to complete the VIA strengths assessment and a series of self-development activities.
• Costs: R250.00 per person
• To register, email Lynn Booysen (lynn.booysen@nwu.ac.za)



Prof. Llewellyn van Zyl with Honours students and staff who attended the PPI workshop

is set to deepen our exploration of positive leadership, relational energy, human-robot collaboration, and innovative assessments of workplace dynamics. This forward-thinking approach emphasises a data-driven, evidence-based methodology that remains adaptable to technological progress. The realisation of POP 2.0's potential relies on collabo-

orative efforts among researchers, practitioners, and organisations to push the boundaries of current practices and integrate scientific breakthroughs into real-world applications.

Click [here](#) to watch a video of his presentation.

Self-management Outcomes in Adults with Type 2 Diabetes

This doctoral study embarked on a comprehensive exploration into the intricate dynamics of type 2 diabetes (T2DM) self-management practices. Grounded in the cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) paradigm, it highlighted how the interplay of T2DM-related thoughts, emotions, and behaviours affect self-management practices. The overarching objective was to formulate CBT-based guidelines that drew from the traditional framework but tapped into the practical nature of CBT by providing flexible guidelines that can be adapted for diverse individuals, various healthcare practitioners, and different healthcare contexts to facilitate effective self-management practices. The aim was to elucidate core CBT skills and techniques into actionable guidelines that healthcare providers could impart to their patients, facilitating a shift in their current management approach.

The need for the research project was founded on the current epidemiology of T2DM. Globally, the prevalence of T2DM is rapidly increasing, creating a cause for concern. It is a multifaceted condition, and its development and management are influenced by lifestyle choices, socio-economic factors, access to resources, cultural beliefs, societal norms and individual beliefs surrounding food, physical activity, and healthcare-seeking behaviours. It is a progressive condition that is coupled with a myriad of challenges associated with its management, which is accompanied by a sense of uncertainty and fear among patients. Thus, it underscores the need for integrating psychologi-

cal approaches into the management of T2DM and for these approaches to be adaptable to the needs of the individual. By fostering a deeper understanding of the psychological dimensions of diabetes self-management and equipping healthcare practitioners with actionable guidelines, this research aimed to provide a foundational framework that can be further developed, refined, and implemented.

The study entailed four main phases: a rapid review, semi-structured interviews, the development of the guidelines, and the Delphi method. The rapid review synthesised existing scientific research on CBT-based interventions for T2DM self-management. Emphasis was placed on identifying literature that indicated how CBT interventions facilitated outcomes such as psychological well-being, glycaemic control, and self-management practices rather than focusing solely on the psychopathological aspects of T2DM.

The insights from the rapid review and interviews informed the development of CBT-based guidelines and identified three main phases for practitioners to employ. The phases included: The introduction phase focused on rapport building, psychoeducation, and collaborative goal setting. The working phase aimed to equip patients with emotional, cognitive, and behavioural skills to improve self-management and provided several techniques and diabetes-specific examples that healthcare practitioners could use. The consolidation phase aimed to consolidate what was covered during the session and allow patients to practice tech-



E Visagie

niques by setting up homework challenges, creating action plans, and identifying resources to maintain management strategies.

Lastly, the CBT-based guidelines were evaluated using the Delphi method. A panel of twelve healthcare practitioners evaluated the content and quality of the developed guidelines over two rounds. The iterative nature ensured that the guidelines met evidence-based practice standards while remaining pertinent to real-world healthcare settings.

In conclusion, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of CBT's role in diabetes self-management and to use its practical nature as an advantage to enhance the quality of life for adults living with T2DM. By fostering a deeper understanding of the psychological dimensions of diabetes self-management and equipping healthcare practitioners with tools and techniques, the guidelines aim to be an additional resource for the self-management of T2DM and empower individuals to bring about change to their self-care practices.

“The need for the research project was founded on the current epidemiology of T2DM.”

My PhD Experiences *by* Susan O'Reilly

In the capacity of my academic role, I recently had the opportunity to participate in a colloquium centred around fostering high-quality postgraduate education, hosted by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and Universities South Africa. Representatives from tertiary institutions across South Africa attended. An overall recommendation emerged suggesting that universities and supervisors should strive towards more structure and collaborative opportunities.

I was surprised to learn that such an approach was not common in many other tertiary institutions. Drawing from my current doctoral student experience, I explained what was considered an exemplary methodology: engaging in a Short Learning Program offered by Optentia, wherein methodologies and other research tools are clarified, and concurrently, crafting an initial draft of one's research proposal.

"... universities and supervisors should strive towards more structure and collaborative opportunities."



Susan O'Reilly

After this, individuals would proceed to register for a PhD and actively participate in various panels, allowing for the presentation of research and seeking guidance from both experts and peers.

My experience underscored the privileged position I occupy as a member of Optentia, partic-

ularly in benefiting from the exemplary working methods of Professors Vera Roos and Ansie Kitching. I remain profoundly thankful for the grace and professionalism consistently demonstrated by my supervisors.

PhD Proposal Journey *by* Linda Dennis

Writing my PhD proposal has felt a lot like being behind the wheel of a left-hand drive, 32-wheeler truck, driving to a destination, in a bustling unfamiliar city, during rush hour traffic, without a navigation system, amidst a sea of roadworks.

The daunting task of defining the research question and finding a gap, whilst navigating through the vast volumes of literature was like trying to pick a lane and then finding out it was going in the wrong direction. At times I was at a complete standstill, with my confidence at an all time low. Making my way through the chaos, has required unwavering



Linda Dennis

determination (and a lot of caffeine). Weaving through the traffic, slowly moving forward, and at times relying on other drivers for direction. The roadblocks and

detours have tested my resilience, but despite the challenges, the destination is finally in sight (I think).

Digitising Democracy *by* Lerato Bodman

The Legislative sector's agility in modifying its business through digitalisation for efficiency increases people's confidence and promotes public participation. This article seeks to explore how democracy is advancing through digitalisation. The example of the E-petition system in the Gauteng Provincial Legislature (GPL) demonstrates how the Legislature is transforming digitally to provide more access to the public. Under the theme "democracy at your fingertips," the E-petition system allows the citizens of Gauteng to submit their Petitions remotely. The E-petition system is available on the GPL website. This system is efficient as it is easy to use and accessible. Citizens do not need to travel to the Legislature to get a Petitions form and submit their Petitions. As easy and accessible as the e-petition system may look, the socio-



economic challenge in society hampers some community members' ability to access the internet. The challenges include not having data or Wi-Fi in their households, load-shedding, not having smart devices, no money for internet cafes, and not being tech-savvy.

However, the risks above do not have to prevent digitalisation in the legislative sector. Instead, educate citizens on how to use and access online services; the

government should assist with providing public Wi-Fi and establish computer laboratories in places such as Parliamentary Constituency Offices, libraries and community centres to allow those who do not have the means to access the internet either by connecting via the public Wi-Fi or use the computers in community centres.

"The directorate's mandate is to improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person ..."

Optentia PhD Students at Research Indaba

Optentia PhD students who recently registered for their studies and doctoral candidates who graduated in 2022 and 2023 attended the Optentia Research Indaba in Cape Town in December 2023. Bianca Arendse (University of Cape Town) who is working on a PhD with Prof. Ian Rothmann as promoter also attended the event.

Optentia is proud of the quality of these colleagues who contributed a significant number of peer-reviewed publications in good quality journals (or will do so in the future).



Starting with the front row (from left to right): Dr Suzette Ragadu, Dr Lance Bunt, Dr Elette Horn, Lowna Gie, Kgomotso Malinga, Sibusiso Mnxuma, Dr Annelisa Murangi, Bianca Arendse, Dr Christiaan Bekker, Dr Thapelo Chachaa, Dr Neil Barnard and Prof. Ian Rothmann,

New Opportunity for Dr Neil Barnard

Dr Neil Barnard, postdoctoral research fellow in Optentia during 2023, was appointed as a senior lecturer in the School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management at the Vanderbijlpark Campus on 1 January 2024. Neil was also appointed as the program leader of the Human Flourishing in Institutions Research Program in Optentia.

Optentia wishes Dr Barnard well in his new role. We are thankful for his inputs into Optentia and his assistance with the presentation of the Academic Mentee program. We wish him the best with his future academic and research work.



Dr Neil Barnard

“... we had to develop a novel management model to accommodate so many students.”

UARM Welcomes the Largest Intake of Students Ever!

Following an orientation day on the Vanderbijlpark campus on 1 February 2024, 22 new Applied Risk Management students settled into the NWU. In the photo, 22 happy students who attended the second contact session in Sandton on 13-15 March 2024 with lecturers Eddie Lindeque, and Fred Goede (program leader). These students were chosen following a rigorous selection process and are all mid-career professionals from across South Africa and neighbouring countries, representing many sectors. At the same time, we have another 11 master's students completing their dissertations this year, plus four newly registered PhD students. As a result, we had to develop a novel management model to accommodate so many students, proudly called UARM 2.0. We believe the change will



Fred Goede and the 2024 Risk Management students

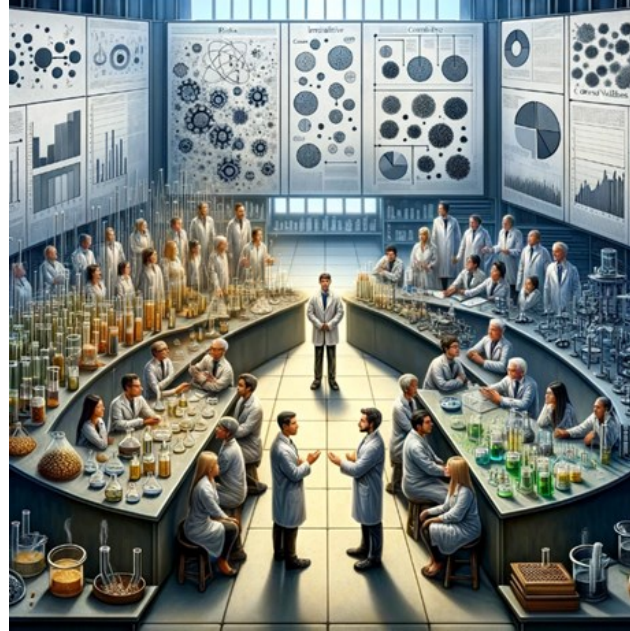
eventually contribute to a larger UARM research output through Optentia. Combined with the hard work of researchers Prof. Hermien Zaaiman and Dr Emmanuel Mulambya, 10 students from the Master's class of 2023 all

completed their studies successfully and more about their May 2024 graduation in the next Optentia Newsletter.

The Debate on Control Variable Use in Research

Control variables are critical for substantiating causal claims in both non-experimental and experimental research, highlighting the importance of refining their selection and reporting. However, the optimal strategy for their inclusion remains debated. When theoretical guidance is absent, the choice between the frugality approach—advocating for the inclusion of controls only when their relevance is certain—and the prolific approach—recommending the inclusion of controls even amidst uncertainty—becomes pivotal. Mändli and Rönkkö (2023) examine these contrasting strategies, offering specific recommendations and critiquing the empirical rules associated with each, such as the frugality approach's caution against ineffective controls and the prolific approach's warning against indiscriminate inclusion. They also show the detrimental effects of including 'bad controls'. Addressing the limitations inherent in both methodologies, Mändli and Rönkkö (2023) draw upon Hünermund et al. (2022) to introduce a four-step framework for the selection of control variables, aiming to enhance the rigor and relevance of research practices. Considering the above it is important to mention the work of Hünermund and Louw (2023). Given the challenge of considering all influencing factors in various contexts, making control variables likely endogenous ('bad controls'), interpreting their effects through a theoretical lens can be misleading. This approach may lead authors to incorrect conclusions and recommendations, and future research could erroneously develop theories

Think — methods — Again



“Control variables are critical for substantiating causal claims ...”

based on these biased findings. Therefore, they advise against interpreting the effects of control variables in published research to prevent such missteps (Hünermund & Louw, 2023).

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Hünermund, P., Louw, B., & Rönkkö, M. (2022). The choice of control variables: How causal graphs can inform the decision. [Academy of Management Proceedings](#), 2022(1), 15534.

Mändli, F., & Rönkkö, M. (2023). To omit or to include? Integrating the frugal and prolific perspectives on control variable use. [Organizational Research Methods](#).



Prof. Leoni van der Vaart

Prof. Caroll Hermann and Bonsaichology

On 2 March 2024, the Wag-'n-Bietjie Bonsai Kai group, in Potchefstroom organised an exhibition at the North-West University Botanical Gardens. The event showcased a demonstration by Prof. Caroll Hermann from the Mahikeng campus, a bonsai practitioner of over four decades. Prof. Hermann, who completed her PhD in 2014 shared insights on tree styling and discussed how one can practice self-care in bonsai cultivation. During the demonstration Prof. Hermann introduced a concept called Bonsaichology, a term she coined to describe the integration of positive psychology into bonsai practices. Her research explored how bonsai can be used as a tool for promoting well-being and helping individuals cope with challenges. Bonsaichology not only honours life through the tradition of bonsai but also provides a platform for individuals to express themselves and



Caring for a tree can be an inspiring activity

“Caring for a tree can be an inspiring activity that allows people to reflect on themselves and grow personally.”

find solace showcasing the therapeutic potential of this art form.

Apart from its aesthetic value, positive psychology and expressive arts like bonsai play a role, in promoting healing and overall wellness. Positive psychology focuses on strengths and virtues that contribute to a life aligning harmoniously with the core principles of cultivation.

Caring for a tree can be an inspiring activity that allows people to reflect on themselves and grow personally. The detailed

work of sculpting a tree in a space reflects the strength needed to overcome life's obstacles. Therefore, bonsai is about fostering emotional strength, improving mental health and meeting with good friends over a couple of trees.

Prevention of and Treatment for Substance Use

Prof. Johnny Strijdom has been working with the National Department of Social Development to finalise the Policy on the Prevention of and Treatment for Substance Use Disorders with proposed amendments to the same Act no 70 of 2008. From April 2024, Prof. Strijdom will conduct research on drugs in Botswana and develop the National Drug Control Strategy with the Technical Task Team in the Ministry of Defense, Justice and Security of the Government of Botswana.



Prof. Johnny Strijdom

Understanding Complex Social Phenomena *by* Andries Baart

Geertje van der Geest, Miriam Traudes and I conducted research for more than eight years in an institution where care is provided to severely handicapped adults with very low IQs, who have autism to the highest degree, are all self-mutilating and sometimes severely behaviourally disturbed. A few also have physical disabilities. The question was how the professionals there managed to successfully provide care to these people: how do they do it? By no means all caregivers were trained for this work but they seemed, at first glance, to be quite capable of it: what are their qualities and what competencies do they deploy in practice? The care provided is very intensive: 24x7 two caretakers per resident, both for living and for day activities; each resident has his own adapted and secured apartment. A second interest was how autonomy could be respected and promoted with these people. If we pay attention to the quality standards and the literature, autonomy would not be an appropriate concept for these residents, except perhaps where minor choices are concerned, such as what they want on bread.

Two books have now been published and in them we answer these questions. The care provided turns out to be very good but not easy to understand. In 'They Can't Say It', Geertje van der Geest - a medical anthropologist describes well, very visually and sometimes compellingly how care is given. And what effect the care provided has on their behaviour and the well-being of the residents. We discussed the observations with the professionals and managers.

From the observations, descriptions and analyses we gradually have learned to understand how essential relational safety is (the alpha and omega of this care), what practical wisdom means, how the attunement of care takes place, how the residents' possibilities for development are broadened and how even these severely disabled people can maintain and increase their autonomy. The professionals appear to be able to 'read' these people but how they do so and what kind of care that produces is often not in line with theory, not in line with what instructors say nor with mandatory competencies, and also not in line with applicable quality policies.

I supervised the research for and wrote a reflective afterword in the book 'They Can't Say It'. I also wrote the essay 'We Have to Say it' in which I explore some of the issues in depth: to begin with, I explain that what these workers do can best be understood as 'everyday hermeneutics' and how such hermeneutics should theoretically and practically be conceived. In doing so, I introduce a new concept. Next, I inspected some 60 methods, all published, currently in use in this kind of care, that claim to be 'proven' or self-proclaimed appropriate. I examine whether they engage in such everyday hermeneutics. The answer is outright negative: what appears to be a successful practice in the field has no or hardly any resonance in the literature, in science or in the circles where methodologies are made. Finally, again by diving thoroughly into the literature, I make a conceptual analysis of 'autonomy': what does the literature say autonomy

is and what do we find in the field? I break down the concept into five sub-concepts, and in this way it can be argued that sometimes with respect to one or two of these sub-concepts, care fails to promote autonomy but in the remaining respects it does. These theoretical explorations end with three refinements: (1) we need a conception of autonomy that relies on a rich and internally differentiated understanding, which moreover is not measured with a point observation (is there autonomy at moment T in relation to dilemma X?) but that is measured over the integral care trajectory; (2) autonomy can best be understood and elaborated as relational autonomy: the reflectively controlled, safe interference of others does not impair autonomy (and authenticity) but, on the contrary, makes the unfolding of autonomy possible: we need others to be autonomous; (3) whoever wants to understand care must not look at all kinds of actions but at complex practices in which actions, bodies, buildings, protocols, financing systems, quality inspection, and training come together: whoever wants to understand what happens here must keep complex matters complex. The need to work with a practice concept has long been known in the social sciences but old-fashioned views break apart that care and then claim something 'scientific' about that single act are still dominant. Wrongly so: there is all the reason to take these gifted practitioners seriously. What they do is relational, through and through. The results of our research therefore go well beyond this sector.

"... we need a conception of autonomy that relies on a rich and internally differentiated understanding."

Introducing Andrew Kavala: PhD Candidate

Andrew is the Country Director for MANEPD—a consortium of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working on ageing issues in Malawi whose aim is to ensure that older men and women enjoy an environment that guarantees a dignified living regardless of age. Recently, Andrew was appointed by the State President of the Republic of Malawi as a Commissioner for the Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC). The Human Rights Commission is a constitutional body established under Chapter XI of the Constitution of Malawi whose broad mandate is to promote and protect human rights and investigate human rights violations.

Andrew has made several breakthroughs by being the first Civil Society Leader to lead an aggressive and successful advocacy

towards an old age pension scheme in Malawi, realizing that social protection floors are increasingly recognised as a necessary and effective approach to ensure the benefits of development are shared fairly, and no one is left behind.

In 2016, Andrew was one of the Founding Directors for Southern Africa Regional Age Network (SARAN), a regional body on ageing in Southern Africa. Andrew sits on both Commonwealth Association for the Ageing (CommonAge) and Global Ageing Network (GAN) boards. He is also a member of the Global Steering Committee for the Global Alliance on the Rights of Older Persons (GAROP).

Andrew, born in Malawi, graduated from the University of Malawi with both a Bachelor of



Andrew Kavala

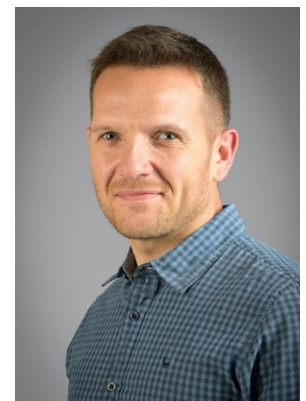
Arts Humanities and Master of Business Administration (MBA). Andrew is currently studying for a PhD in Social Sciences with Ageing and Development at North-West University (NWU)—a public University in South Africa.

“Andrew led an aggressive and successful advocacy towards an old age pension scheme in Malawi...”

Welcome Frans!

Frans du Toit (PhD Candidate, Social Sciences with Relational Dynamics and Development) introduces himself as follows: I am newly enrolled in the PhD in Relational Dynamics and Development program. By day, I serve as a Clinical Psychologist in a multi-disciplinary team at a Physical and Neuro-Rehabilitation unit in Potchefstroom, specializing in the recovery of patients following spinal cord injuries, strokes, and traumatic brain injuries. Beyond my professional commitments, I run a private practice in the evenings, employing an interactional therapeutic approach to address relational well-being. In this role, I often encounter individuals who feel disempowered and stuck in various relationships, particularly within work

contexts, leading to severe psychological challenges at times. My decision to pursue a PhD in Relational Dynamics and Development stems from the desire to understand these complexities, contribute knowledge to practice, and ultimately empower and inspire individuals facing challenges in their relationships. I look forward to this enriching academic journey and the positive impact it may bring.



Frans du Toit

Engagement-Financial Performance Myth *by* Prof. L. van Zyl

Companies are always looking for ways to boost employee performance and financial success. One widely used strategy centers around improving employee engagement. The belief is that nurturing engaged, happy employees will lead to increased productivity, better customer service, and ultimately higher profits. However, the harsh reality is that employee engagement alone doesn't necessarily translate into better financial performance.

Organisations invest millions in engagement initiatives like rewards programs, team-building activities, and wellness plans, yet these rarely "work." While these efforts may boost morale and create a positive environment, they often fail to deliver a real return on investment. The truth is, if these initiatives don't directly impact core business metrics, they don't really matter from a financial standpoint.

The idea that employee engagement directly boosts financial performance is a fallacy. This notion is misleading; work engagement refers to creating a fulfilling environment where employees feel energized and absorbed in their tasks, suggesting the need for a deeper exploration of alternatives. Proponents of engagement argue that engaged employees boost productivity and profits, as research indicates a positive correlation with job performance. However, this connection doesn't consistently translate to overall financial success. The simplistic link between engagement and performance overlooks the complexity of individual motivation, organisational culture, and the dynamic business environment. Consequently,

there's growing scepticism about the direct impact of employee engagement on tangible business outcomes like revenue and profitability, questioning the straightforward relationship between "soft" employee experiences and "hard" financial metrics.

Surprisingly, academic research linking subjective employee experiences to real-world financial or hard performance is quite sparse. In the very few studies where the relationship between employee engagement and financial performance was investigated, the empirical evidence supporting this notion was far from conclusive.

Research shows an inconsistent link between work engagement and financial performance, with some studies finding weak or no correlation. Confounding factors such as industry type, organisation size, and economic conditions often muddy any observed relationship. Despite the lack of solid empirical backing, the belief that employee engagement boosts financial outcomes remains widespread. The key to improving financial performance lies not solely in fostering engagement but in aligning employees' roles and efforts with the strategic objectives and growth goals of the organisation.

The challenge is to ensure that the right growth-orientated metrics are identified and that these metrics are, indeed, predictive of an organisation's growth goals and financial growth targets. So rather than relying solely on engagement metrics, companies should adopt a more comprehensive and data-driven approach to their organisational development, talent management,

and performance management strategies.

Financial performance is influenced by triggers, processes, and context. Companies need to analyse their strategy, growth goals, values, job designs, employee capabilities, and job characteristics to identify key financial performance predictors. Actively measuring and modelling these factors helps determine the best strategies for enhancing financial outcomes.

For example, in a car dealership, sales performance is influenced by capabilities (like negotiation skills), job characteristics (such as manager support), environmental factors (inventory availability), and rewards (commission structure). These contribute to organisational commitment and extra-role behaviours, which predict sales and financial outcomes. However, the importance of these factors varies across financial cycles, with some periods experiencing more pressure. Measuring these factors and figuring out the "strongest" or most relevant predictors at any given time can help target the allocation of resources or interventions to address the issues that would get us the most proverbial "bang for our buck." By leveraging advanced data analytics and adopting a more data-driven decision-making approach, organisations can gain valuable insights into the specific drivers of financial performance within their unique business context. This approach allows companies to identify the most impactful areas for investment and prioritise initiatives that directly contribute to achieving their financial goals.

"... rather than relying solely on engagement metrics, companies should adopt a more comprehensive and data-driven approach."

Exploring Adaptive Ageing in Rural Zambia and Discovering Myself

Andrew Banda (PhD, Social Sciences with Ageing and Development) shared the following: "Pursuing a PhD has always been a great deal to me! Finishing it within three years was a huge milestone, and achieving it was fulfilling. The next morning, I woke up with a smile, but it will take a while for it to sink in. Thanks to the very supportive Promoter, mentors, and the staff at Optentia Research Unit.

Optentia Research Unit provided me with a lot of knowledge, insight, skills, and wisdom that shaped my PhD journey and I continue to use them daily even without realising it. In particular, the short learning program during my first year in the PhD program helped shape the landscape of my research approach and structure my work. The workshops and seminars organised by Optentia helped me approach research in a critical but organised manner.

Two moments stand out as the best experience in my PhD. The first was during data collection; Traversing the rural communities of Zambia, experiencing and hearing the deep conversations of how older persons adapt amidst the limitations of rural settings was indeed the epitome of my PhD journey. Secondly, it was when our first paper was published and cited it gave me the feeling that the research brought out significant information and contributed to the rural ageing discourse.

My PhD time has helped me rediscover myself, and identify my weaknesses and strengths. Luckily! My research has taught me to adapt even in settings of scarcity. If doing a PhD again, I

would still choose a multidisciplinary approach.

Currently, I intend to pursue a Postdoc to research further on the adaptive ageing of rural older persons with a gender dimension."

PS: As Andrew's supervisor it is my huge delight and privilege to congratulate him as the first person to obtain a unique multidisciplinary PhD in Social Sciences with Ageing and Development. This degree, developed at NWU, is a first for Africa and after more than 30 years in the field of re-



Dr Andrew Banda

search on ageing in Africa it is a personal highlight to welcome Andrew as a colleague and one of the few socio-gerontologists on the continent. (Jaco Hoffman).

"Finishing it within three years was a huge milestone, and achieving it was fulfilling."



Andrew Banda busy with focus group



Andrew Banda doing research in Zambia

Religion and Health *by* Vhumani Magezi

The role of religious actors in Adolescent and Youth Sexual Reproductive Health (AYSRH) is characterised by duality and contradiction, ascribed to their performance of both positive and negative roles. This has caused an ongoing tension and ambivalence between religious actors and public health establishments. The study, "Religion and health ambivalence gridlock: Towards optimisation of churches as assets for adolescent and youth sexual reproductive health" qualitatively explored the AYSRH interventions that could be implemented at the nexus of religion and public health. The study employed a theory proposition that draws from and is informed by the notion of ambivalence as a positive construct to diffuse the tension between church religious communities and public health institutions on AYSRH. The study lever-

aged on religious health assets (RHA) to optimise the role of churches within their community spaces in AYSRH interventions. The study accounted for the sources of inherent AYSRH tension between religious actors and government and Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and proceeded to employ ambivalence as a critical framework to assess churches' AYSRH interventions. An ambivalence diagnostic framework was developed to predict church communities' likely positions and stance on AYSRH, as well as potential cooperation in interventions with non-religious actors. The study developed a theoretical approach called AYSRH 'interventions and actors' position shift (change)' model. This positional shift is undergirded by the following principles: joint exploration; negotiation; transparency in values and pre-



Prof. Vhumani Magezi

suppositions; interest to learn and appreciate the other actors' position; identifying connection points; and common interest.

"The role of religious actors in Adolescent and Youth Sexual Reproductive Health is characterised by duality and contradiction."

My PhD Journey *by* Dr Elette Horn

In her thesis, Elette studied the most crucial 21st-century competencies, capabilities and functioning of financial accounting students. The thesis significantly enriches the understanding of the capabilities required by students, lecturers, and professionals in the South African financial accountancy sector, integrating 21st-century competencies to outline essential elements for the profession's sustainability. It contributes novel insights into the interplay between student capabilities, cynicism, flourishing, and the intention to leave university, shedding light on critical factors affecting student engagement and

success within higher education institutions.

Elette wrote the following about her PhD journey: "A journey worth a thousand words, that is the summary of my PhD. Where a picture presents a snapshot in time, this journey encapsulates a thousand pictures. Even though I have never climbed Mount Everest, I expect it to be similar in magnitude of preparation, support, perseverance, and achievement. Worthwhile and exciting but also full of challenges – Optentia is the perfect navigational research house that offers access to local and international experienced researchers, social sup-



Dr Elette Horn

port networks, and top-quality training opportunities for the capability development required to successfully complete this PhD journey. With a grateful heart."

My PhD Journey *by* Carol Dixon

"Navigating through these complexities was far from a solitary endeavour..."

My journey of publishing a scoping review in an academic journal proved to be both challenging and immensely rewarding. The drafting process was messy and iterative, involving numerous revisions and rounds of feedback. Attention to detail and the relentless refinement of content demanded careful consideration of every idea, word, and punctuation mark. Navigating through these complexities was far from a solitary endeavour. I received unwavering support and encouragement from my supervisors, Vera Roos and Matthews Katjene. They were there to guide me through moments of confusion and uncertainty, offering solace amidst bewilderment and ambiguity—integral components of my growth as an academic scholar, a title I still find surreal to embrace. My journey encompassed a transformation—from finding feedback daunting and painful, to recognising its necessity, and eventually embracing it as a privilege to contribute to the realm of knowledge. It took immense perseverance to overcome bouts of procrastination—I humorously refer to my journey as a "P-rocrastination of the Highest D-degree!" Embracing the



Carol Dixon and her mother, Phyllis Beck

empathy and compassion of Vera and Matthews, alongside cultivating self-compassion, became instrumental in combating self-doubt. Amidst the challenges, I constantly reminded myself of the underlying motivation driving my pursuit. While initially motivated by a desire to fulfil my intention of pursuing a PhD and making a meaningful impact on research, this journey has evolved into something deeply personal. My 90-yr-old mother's unwavering belief in my abilities took on new meaning through this

research. It offered me a fresh perspective on her experiences as an older individual residing in a formal care setting, fostering a profound empathetic connection towards her and the caregivers entrusted with her well-being. Publishing our first article "Effective relationships between younger caregivers and older care recipients across a continuum of formal residential care settings: A scoping review and a critical analysis" in the Public Health Reviews Journal is indeed cause for celebration!!!

News from the Human Flourishing in Institutions Program

Various PhD students in the Human Flourishing in Institutions are making good progress with their studies. The following PhD candidates hope to submit their theses at the end of May 2024: a) Thera Lobi (Psychology), Praise Choeni, Industrial Psychology, and Coen Welsh (Industrial Psychology). Two other students are making progress with their the-

ses: a) Sibusiso Mnxuma (Industrial Psychology) and b) Mandla Ndlangamandla (Human Resource Management).

Prof. Ian Rothmann was recently reappointed on the National Board of the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology.



Prof. Ian Rothmann

The Human Cost of Resource Extraction *by* Charl Gertse

South Africa has a long history of employment-related family absence due to labour migration. Scarce job opportunities in certain regions force individuals to seek work far from home. In this context, in mineral-rich areas where mining companies operate. This leaves families facing routine separation, with some employees working extended shifts far from their loved ones.

My master's dissertation explored the dynamic of this separation and its impact on both miners and their families. The research focused on the risks and influences this separation poses. In a nutshell, mining employees experience loneliness, isolation, financial challenges, and increased stress, potentially leading to mental health concerns. Families, meanwhile, face the challenges of single parenting, disrupted routines, and a weakened support system among others. The crucial role of social workers in managing these cases also came under scrutiny. By understanding these challenges, the industry and social services can develop more effective case management support systems. My master's experience has been



Charl Gertse

an eye-opening exploration into the human cost of resource extraction, and the importance of prioritising the well-being of those who make it possible. I extend my gratitude to my esteemed supervisors, Prof. Jaco Hoffman, and Prof. Elma Ryke, whose support and guidance were instrumental in completing this study.

As we navigate the difficulties of labour migration and its impacts on families, there lies an opportunity for collaboration between industry stakeholders,

social services, and communities to implement holistic support mechanisms. By fostering empathy, understanding, and proactive interventions, we can strive towards a future where the well-being of all individuals affected by labour migration is safeguarded and supported.

"... mining employees experience loneliness, isolation, financial challenges, and increased stress, potentially leading to mental health concerns."

From Community Project to International Peer-reviewed Publication

Constant van Graan is currently registered for a PhD in Social Sciences with Relational Dynamics and Development. We interviewed Constant van Graan. "On the fortnight of submitting my final thesis, I'm a mix of emotions. I'm a bit exhausted, but I'm also somewhat happy, especially since I've tried to stay balanced during these two years – I've completed a new adventure novel and recorded four new songs. But mostly, I'm underwhelmed. In a good way. You see, I've been pushed so far out of my comfort zone, that completing my studies almost seems normal. That's what doing a Ph.D. at Optentia does to you – you are forced to swim in the turbulent waters of complex methodologies and ideas, till you realise you might not be drowning, but sailing through the water like a swordfish! Thank



Constant van Graan

"I've been pushed so far out of my comfort zone, that completing my studies almost seems normal."

you, Vera and Matthews, for pushing me overboard (in the best sense of the words). To the other Ph.D. candidates who might still have a rough swim ahead – do not wish this time away. There

really is value in adversity. The experience will change you forever, and that's a good thing."

PhD Completed: Dr Kalashni Narainsamy

Kalashni completed her honours degree in Human Resource Management at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2008 and started her professional career in 2008 as an HR generalist. She completed an honours degree in Industrial Psychology (2008) and a master's in Industrial Psychology (2016) at the University of South Africa. She became a registered industrial psychologist with the Health Professions Council in 2017. Kalashni held various human resource management positions within the banking, medical and food and beverage industries. She changed her career path to address social and environmental issues. She is currently the Sustainability and Responsibility Manager for Africa

and the Middle East for a global company.

Kalashni's thesis offers insights into organisational design within educational contexts, emphasising the importance of stakeholder identification, role clarity, departmental interaction, leadership, and accountability. The study identifies three distinct social support profiles (connected, moderate, and isolated) through person-centred analyses, and highlights the pivotal role of social support in educational settings.



Dr Kalashni Narainsamy

Fieldwork for PhD in Orange Farm

Lowna Gie (PhD Candidate, Social Sciences with Ageing and Generational Dynamics) wrote: In November and December 2023, I conducted the quantitative stage of my PhD study in Orange Farm (Gauteng). I collaborated with Afrika Tikkun – a non-profit company offering child and youth development programs “from the cradle to career”. Together with staff from Afrika Tikkun, I interviewed and selected 15 youth (who had completed Afrika Tikkun’s Career Development Program) to be trained as fieldworkers. The training covered research objectives, participant engagement, questionnaire administration, interviewing techniques, accurate data recording, and ethical considerations. The actual training conditions were challenging, largely because we were in a shipping container during a heatwave.

During the training, we co-created the questionnaire and fieldwork process. The fieldworkers provided valuable inputs and insights, which made the study relevant and culturally appropriate for the local content. It also created buy-in from the fieldworkers and they were motivated to collect



Six days and 300 questionnaires later!!!! Fantastic!

quality data. After an intensive five-day training period and conducting a pilot study, the 15 fieldworkers recruited participants and administered a collective total of 300 questionnaires to youth in Orange Farm over a period of six days. I am so incredibly proud of them for this achievement as it is no small feat.

When I reflect on the fieldwork, the highlight for me was seeing the newfound sense of pride and confidence among the fieldworkers. The training and co-creation process had empowered them to successfully administer

the questionnaires and recognise the value their contributions added to the study.



Lowna Gie

“The actual training conditions were challenging, largely because we were in a shipping container during a heatwave.”



Six days and 300 questionnaires later!

Researching Practices *by* Prof. Andries Baart

I am a (passionate) reader of books. Always have been. But I am increasingly realising that in my context I am becoming something of a fossil or, as my grandson would say, a Dino. For that reason, at the turn of the year, I read five, thick graphic novels all related to my field of work: healthcare, loneliness, community life, etc. It was not the first time I read such graphic novels, but how wonderful, to the point, revealing and informative they are! If we (teacher, student) want to begin to understand certain social phenomena (dying, being addicted, unemployment, suffering from Alzheimer's, being bored to death, identity questions, caring for the elderly, psychiatric problems, belonging to a youth gang) graphic novels have a lot to offer: language, concepts and analysis, of course, but also compelling scenes, catchy colors, overwhelming images, multi-layered fantasies, fears and relief. The graphic novel opens all kinds of registers of your mood and the resulting understanding is rich, deep, personal. I was often amazed at how beautifully and modernly drawn these novels are. Graphic novels are not old-fashioned comics at all!

I mention it here because an article appeared in *Medical Humanities* of March 2024 titled "Bridging comic art and research: lessons from an interdisciplinary collaboration project in a palliative care context" (DOI: 10.1136/medhum-2023-012750; free download ResearchGate). In it we read how scientists (like us at Optentia) collaborated with artists at a high and successful level. Together they created the poignant graphic novel *Neighbors*



Prof. Andries Baart

and investigated its impact. The article presents the lessons learned. I quote: "The following issues are important for any art-research collaboration: (1) an interest in and acknowledgement of each other's (potentially diverging) aims and roles: all parties should – from the start – commit themselves to interdisciplinary collaboration and to exploring the added value of using each other's methods, thereby finding a common methodological ground and language; (2) a continuous discussion of the sometimes contrasting approaches between artists and researchers: differences in using theory and story may result in different criteria for creating good art. When balancing scientific and aesthetic aims, the trustworthiness of the art work should remain an important criterion; (3) an awareness of the potential of interdisciplinary collaboration to offering new perspectives on one's scientific data collection and analysis, for example, providing other conceptualizations or indicating blind spots, provided that artists are involved in the early phases of research." Could it be something for Op-

tentia, could it allow our students to make their MA theses this way, could it increase outreach, could it make us attractive to young people, and could it tap into the inexhaustible resource of modern African art? I look forward to Optentia's graphic novels on respect for the elderly, on youth unemployment or on human flourishing in contemporary South Africa: conceptually and scientifically completely up to date, beautiful and attractive to read and look at. Perhaps also something for the upcoming festival of qualitative research?

The *Aya* -series explores the pains and pleasures of everyday life in a working-class neighborhood in West Africa." See: *New York Times* ([Feb. 10, 2024](#)):

"When balancing scientific and aesthetic aims, the trustworthiness of the art work should remain an important criterion..."

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Books

- Aguinis, H. (2025). Research methodology: Best practices for rigorous, credible, and impactful research. Sage.
- Aronson, D. (2024). The value of values: How leaders can grow their businesses and enhance their careers by doing the right thing. The MIT Press.
- Flett, G.L. (2018). The psychology of mattering: Understanding the human need to be significant. Academic Press.
- Keyes, C. (2024). Languishing: How to feel alive again in a world that wears us down. Penguin.
- Suleyman, M. & Bhaskar, M. (2024). The coming wave: AI, Power and the twenty-first century's greatest dilemma. Vintage.

Upcoming Events (Click [here](#) to go to the Optentia Research Calendar)

Useful Websites

- <https://goodorganisations.com>
- <https://youtube.com/c/GoodOrganisations> is an informative YouTube channel
- www.refseek.com is a search engine for academic resources.
- www.worldcat.org - search the content of 20,000 global libraries.
- <https://link.springer.com> - access to more than 10 million scientific documents: books, articles,
- <http://repec.org> - Volunteers from 102 countries collected nearly 4 million publications
- www.science.gov is a U.S. government search engine.
- www.pdfdrive.com is the largest website for free download of PDF books.
- www.base-search.net is one of the most powerful search engines for academic research texts.