

Narrative and Adolescence Workshop
Cape Town 1 – 3 March 2020



UK Research
and Innovation



Workshop Summary

The *Narrative and Adolescence* workshop took place in Cape Town, 1 – 3 March 2020, as the second in a series of four planned workshops under Work Package 3 (WP3) of the UKRI GCRF Accelerating Achievement for Africa's Adolescents Hub. The workshop built on the first that was held in Oxford, 31 October – 2 November 2019, entitled *Understanding Adolescence in African Contexts*.

Narrative and Adolescence was held at Community House in Salt River, a location of profound historical relevance in the South African history of labour movements and unions. As organisers we chose this site to honour the history of the anti-apartheid movement and South Africans' ongoing process of seeking self-determination and what Steve Biko characterised as achieving an 'envisioned', inwardly consolidated self (*I Write What I Like*, 1978). Workshop participants were

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drawn from various locations from across Africa, Europe and North America. Broadly, they comprised Hub members, academics, writers, performers, poets and researchers from a wide variety of fields as well as activists and organizations working with adolescents and youth. Nineteen of the more than 50 participants were young people representing different youth groups and programmes, in particular, Lesedi Arts Collective, Ubuntu Fashion Trends and Ikamva Youth. The workshop programme and a full list of participants appears below.

The workshop focused on how adolescents across the African continent use storytelling, performance and a range of narrative forms and patterns to understand their worlds and their place in it. Across the three days, participants were invited to think through different kinds of adolescent stories and ways of storytelling. The aim was to discover more about these stories and narrative procedures, especially what they tell us about: (i) how the well-being of adolescents can be supported; (ii) how can adolescents exercise agency through story-telling and other kinds of creative practice; (iii) how institutions, structures and social interventions might clash with individual adolescents' stories; (iv) how institutions, structures and social interventions could help to shape these stories in empowering ways. Asking these questions about storytelling and adolescence required approaches that bridged disciplines, bringing in perspectives from psychiatry to literary studies, public health to geography and economics to medical humanities and philosophy. It also meant listening attentively to the experiences and work of storytellers, performers, and especially adolescent storytellers themselves.

This report does not attempt to capture the full content of the three days, but narrates some of the highlights and key points. Where the first day involved work with adolescents themselves, the remaining two days of the workshop were divided into thematic sessions in which participants made brief presentations after which the discussions were opened up to the floor.

Day One of the workshop, entitled '*Me and my stories*', was dedicated to working with adolescents and youth groups. Those in attendance, apart from the core Work Package 3 team, included the invited youth groups as well as adolescents and facilitators from Interfer and Clowns Without Borders. After the welcome and introductions, Interfer provided the kick-start activity to help break the ice and draw our participants, especially the young people, into the workshop. The introductions were done bilingually, in Xhosa and English, with translations alternating between the two. Afrikaans was also used by some participants and groups. We were then split into groups where we used drawing and colouring to try to give expression to some formative life narratives (growing up, getting older). Continuing with colouring pencils and flipcharts, participants then broached the subject of stereotypes

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and answered the key question: what are some of the stereotypical ideas that circulate about young people? This was followed by a sharing session in which the young people spoke to their illustrations and drawings. They outlined some of the limiting ideas and analogies often uncritically foisted upon them. The adolescents also talked about how they would like to be seen by others. Suggestions on how this could be done included the idea that more attention should be paid to the complexity and variety of the contexts they inhabit. Their contexts should not be used as a frame to view them in ways that deny the adolescents' individuality.

The poet performers Siphokazi Jonas and Lisa Julie then gave presentations of their work. Before reading and speaking from their work, each poet shared what poetry means to them and how they hoped their words might impact their audiences. They showcased how poetry – like other forms of art – can be a medium through which memories, hopes, desires, and provocations can be voiced and powerfully shared with others.

Following these performances, Clowns Without Borders brought all of the participants back into the main group using dance, chanting, group tableaux, and quiet reflection. Day one was capped with performances from the invited youth groups. Lesedi Art Collective shared a drama skit that was coupled with singing. Ubuntu Fashion Trends put on a fashion show, showcasing their fashion designs and styles.



Dance activity with the adolescents

Day Two of the workshop welcomed other Hub members as well as academics, researchers, activists and representatives of the youth groups who participated on the first day.

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The first session, *‘Empowerment Through Story’*, looked at how stories and performances articulate our experiences and empower us. Presentations were made by Jess Auerbach, Lesley Gittings and Musa Kika. Jess highlighted the emergence of ‘digital natives’, a concept that has emerged to describe the generations who have grown up with the internet. In many African countries, there is increasing engagement with the internet among young people and yet limited access to it. Lesley highlighted that most young men are reticent to share their stories but song can be used to express the vulnerability and challenges they experience. Musa shared a story of a child charged for malicious damage to property to highlight the abuse adolescents endure whilst in forced child-marriages. The story showed how child protection and civil society work can be done. Through understanding adolescents’ motivations and the narratives through which those motivations are expressed, it becomes easier to advocate for policy reform. Many adolescents, however, do not have sufficient access to information with the rural-urban divide affecting rural girls more since this is where there is the least mobile infrastructure and connectivity.

In the second session, *‘Narrative is different’*, presenters drawn from diverse professions explained how they utilised storytelling in their approaches to working with adolescents. The discussants for this session were Isang Awah, Clowns Without Borders, Lisa Julie, Isaac Ndlovu and Elona Toska. Drawing on texts and case studies that had been circulated to participants, the workshop looked at: (i) the role of narrative in shaping how African adolescents understand themselves and their place in the world; and (ii) how narrative interactions involving African adolescents can help us understand the adolescent and their actions. It became clear that narratives are different for the same interventions across global divides. For example, a common narrative on cash transfers and social grants is that they are framed as charity. Against this, some Latin American countries tried shifting from the narrative of charity to one of cash transfer as a right. As this shows, different stories have different humanizing or dehumanizing, empowering or disempowering implications.

‘Narrative is different’ also discussed how we frame basic needs versus emotional needs in interventions, and the important question of how we treat and approach other people’s children. Isang highlighted a connection explored in a Nigerian writing competition between what children read, and how and what they write. She observed that most children involved in the competition did not see themselves as worthy of being written about. Their stories featured foreign places and characters. Lisa indicated that in her work in tertiary level education, students always looked at texts in ways informed by their social context. For example, they often approached the literary canon with discomfort, uncertain about it as a source of guiding stories. Isaac discussed the implications of

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thinking about adolescence in linear terms, as ‘just a stage’ between childhood and adulthood, similar to how life, according to the Russian writer Nabokov, is seen as a ‘piece of light between two eternal darkneses’. Elona and Clowns Without Borders discussed how parents and caregivers with adolescent children often end up treating other adolescents (in the community/research/work) similar to how they treat their own children, that is, in a ‘homogenising’ way. However, sharing stories provides helpful ways through which the different perspectives of parents, caregivers and teenagers can be voiced.

Several key points emerged from the discussion that followed. First, it emerged that writing could be seen as a form of thinking, or a practice of thought. Second, writing is always involved in its social context, just as writers too are involved. Therefore, writers’ stories matter to the extent that the writers are seen to matter. Third, there was a crisis of imagination in stories being told and consumed across Africa in that very few stories are being framed within an African context. Most teenagers narrated their stories of hope based on the idea of going abroad into diaspora as the measure of success. There was general regret and concern about the dearth of writing and stories for teenagers on the continent. Important questions that remained were: who owns the stories of young people? How do we properly treat young people’s stories? How do we preserve the integrity of those stories, including when they are passed on? It is frustrating that story-telling exercises are often presented with an agenda. The Hub might usefully be aware of this. The discussion reiterated the important point that interventions including narrative-based interventions be context-specific and applicable to local needs. We need to keep noticing how the stories young people share – not only the broad patterns but also the nuances – speak to their experiences.

The third session, led by Nanjala Nyabola, Andile M-Afrika, Alude Mahali and Aleya Kassam, focussed specifically on the *Black Consciousness Movement* (BCM) as a movement of ‘self-making’. Participants foregrounded their discussions with readings from the work of Steve Biko (1946-1977), the South African medical doctor and prominent Black Consciousness activist and thinker. Biko once wrote: ‘The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. If one is free at heart, no man-made chains can bind one to servitude’. Throughout we were concerned to highlight Biko’s central call for emancipation to be achieved *by* the oppressed, not on their behalf by others (especially the wealthy or privileged). Across Africa – and not only in South Africa – Biko’s message remains politically relevant and charged. For academics in the North, including in the Hub, it can help to remind us to design interventions that are always subject-centred. Critically, Biko’s arguments suggest that our understanding of ourselves in society can be changed by how we act and

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how we talk about that action – the stories we tell about it. This is potentially a critical point for the Hub's work. The Hub can learn not just from what Biko said, but from his approach. Biko showed how negative narratives had often been applied to Black South Africans and how these narratives could then influence their decisions in negative ways. But he also outlined how the narrative could be changed through self-belief and how such a change empowers.

The '*Black Consciousness*' session comprised four statements. Nanjala pointed out that Biko articulated how people can take power by imagining themselves as agents or authors of their own action. This is what story-telling can give us, an empowering discourse: when people believe they can do something inspired by a story they act as if they actually *can* do that thing. This demonstrates the power of Biko as an organic intellectual, writing from and for the context he was a part of. He addressed the inhumanity of the system within which black people existed at the time, smiling in public while crying in private. But his ideas can be adapted to critique contemporary neoliberal conditions: for example, that the aspiration of development is to achieve a middle-class lifestyle, or that freedom means proximity to whiteness or appropriating its trappings. The questions he raised remain pressing and controversial today.

Andile highlighted that BCM was a movement in which members were engaged in working on their own minds. How would such an approach, designed to empower and not direct, fit with interventions designed to improve specific outcomes? In our workshop, how could we learn from this approach and use narrative to connect with and empower adolescents in African contexts? How could the provocations of Black Consciousness theory and practice combined with narrative strategies change our research approaches to the adolescents that the Hub seeks to help? Andile read from the river swimming scene in *I Write What I Like*, how it gives a strong sense of the young men's inwardness, how they interacted with the world physically, through their bodies.

Alude importantly shifted the focus to gender and to women in particular, noting the exclusive terms in which Biko's address to 'the black man' was framed, important as it was. She further pointed out that both male *and* female adolescents face difficulties around well-being and survival. Alude also highlighted how BCM-style thinking has been used by young black women in collectives and in group work. Key questions included asking directly what the place of black women was in relation to BC practices of empowerment? How do ideas of political, intellectual and social agency need to be adapted and distributed to help us, as researchers and practitioners, design and conceptualize better interventions for all?

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Aleya continued this thread by exploring how BCM questions power dynamics, looking at how the powerful are kept in power and the powerless in subjugation in structural terms. In effect, adolescent men and women are measured by a standard they never agreed to. Using a Kenyan oral tale as a case-in-point, she raised the concern that the heroes of traditional stories were men and that female heroes were not allowed the complexity or the good name afforded to men.

The session concluded with a discussion of how these insights could be developed to think about model stories in more constructive ways. After all, BC offers young people the freedom to write themselves into futures that are imaginative and speculative. A final insight was that we especially need to take account of the multiple intersecting influences on adolescents including gender if interventions are to be appropriately designed.



Sikelela Kwatsha of Ubuntu Fashion Trends giving a presentation

Day Three continued to deepen our understanding of narrative and story-telling in relation to adolescence. In the first session, ‘*Collective stories: narrative and intervention*’, participants explored how stories work in practice. They probed how narratives evolve as activists and practitioners bring other people into their work and spaces. The panellists Ubah Farah, Kingwa Kamencu, Noella Moshi, Boniface Mwangi, Sikelela Kwatsha, Clyde Muller and Yanga Totyi offered snapshots of their personal stories. Ubah shared her story of being a mixed-race migrant in Europe, and the sense of in-betweenness this raised. How do we talk about violence with young refugees who have gone through so much trial and tribulation? What are the stories and images that capture this experience? There are multiple intersecting reasons for young people to seek to leave Africa. People ‘leave in the afternoon’, *rahl*, a verb in Somali with negative connotations.

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Kingwa explored stories and stereotypes of women in Kenya. The most common narrative is that ‘a woman is to endure’, whether as a victim or beast of burden. Strong narratives exist that oppose adolescent women who want to break free from these norms and use music and drama to express their desires and thoughts. There is a stigma against single women and a lot of sexism towards women in politics. In response to this, Kingwa created a parody real-life skit called Madam President and formed The Kenya Sex Party where through her ‘Underwear free Africa’ campaign she tried to push back with humour and reject the stereotyped niches designated for women.

Noella shared a personal story about being inspired by ideas of African excellence in making a life for herself in Nigeria. She pointed out that there is no such thing as ‘an African’. The minute you define ‘African’ you exclude someone else. There are stories about Africa that people tell – stories of borders and limitations – that often inhibit Western funders as well as the young African entrepreneurs they work with. The stories we tell ourselves as Africans can be stories of hope even despite our difficulties.

Boniface told a story of his life as a lone activist. After the 2007 post-election violence in Kenya he founded a creative hub that encourages citizens to learn how to speak out. He pointed out that for this movement to work, activists had to live in the community and become a part of the people; they had to frame their narrative *within* that community.

Sikelela described his experience as a fashion designer who expresses himself through clothes that are inspired by Africa. He did so to highlight that youth who often limit themselves should rather try to be proactive, recognising their uniqueness, and seeking to create new networks. Tell the world who you are, he urged. Clyde Muller narrated his own story as a fire-starter, that is, as someone who took a leadership role at an early age. He pointed out that young people can be peacemakers and they can be troublemakers. Failure can be a good lesson for others. He thrives by not giving up, by standing up and giving others joy and happiness. He encouraged other adolescents to be who they are and not to allow their background to restrict them.

Yanga talked about the framing of stories from her perspective as a youth worker. What are the stories we give people when they come to our offices for help? Offering an example from the work Ikamva does, she pointed out that the story youth are told is that they are people who need to be saved. As they are poor and from difficult backgrounds, they need an outsider to come and rescue them. Too often research practitioners bark at young people about who they ought to be. She pointed out that

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youth are tired of such adult stories and behaviours. Researchers should be brave enough to support adolescents to own their failure and raise the bar on their potential.

Participants then explored in broader terms how stories influence the ways in which young people understand and relate to the world and establish themselves in it. We saw that this involved tackling important and difficult questions: How can better understandings of narratives improve interventions involving adolescents? How do stories impact on policy set-up and design? These discussions will form part of an ongoing process of interrogating work across the Hub and will be developed in a series of short papers including on Adolescent engagement and activities, on BC thought, and on self-empowerment. These papers will draw together and expand upon findings from our discussions, as outlined above, including on how BC ideas and the related stories we tell about ourselves can help us exercise agency in our lives, and on how story-telling approaches and techniques can improve our research on adolescence. An audio file of key quotations will also be available. [LINK](#). A further suggestion that arose from workshop participants was that adolescent representation should ideally be increased, not to say doubled, in Hub research activities going forward. Through Work Package 3, the Hub can adopt an emancipatory pedagogy whereby the added objective of helping to improve the material conditions of adolescents through self-belief and -empowerment is prioritised.



Yanga Totyi of Ikamva Youth in conversation with Annabel Morgan of Clowns Without Borders

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Workshop Programme

‘Adolescence ... is a cultural as much as a socio-economic phenomenon ... Brute realities only make sense when mediated through the framings of all participants.’
Robert Mayhew, *‘Sausages and Kebabs’*, 2019.

Introduction:

The UKRI GCRF Accelerating Achievement for Africa’s Adolescents Hub (Accelerate Hub) is a five-year initiative funded by UK Research and Innovation through the Global Challenges Research Fund (UKRI GCRF). Our goal is to improve outcomes for 20 million adolescents and their children, in 34 countries across Africa. In our Hub work package (WP3), led by Chris Desmond and Elleke Boehmer, we aim to explore how contexts, narratives and neurology, in isolation and through interactions, point to innovative ways of reaching out to young people and designing, predicting and shaping interventions.

Focus: This workshop focuses on narrative—how adolescents in African contexts use story-telling, performance and all kinds of narrative formations—to understand their worlds and their place in it.

Day One: Sunday 1 March 2020 ‘Me and my stories’

12:00-12:30pm	Welcome and Introductions Elleke Boehmer, Chris Desmond and Zimpande Kawanu (all from Hub Work Package 3) welcome everyone. We will introduce the day and some of the ideas and activities we are hoping to explore.
12:30-1:30pm	Interfer (Nabeel Petersen, Lucia Mfubu) Participants will have been given the workshop readings in advance. In this first hour we will explore the objectives of the workshop especially the differences in the idea of stories told about us, and stories we tell ourselves. After the welcome, Interfer will provide an initial kick-start activity to situate participants, especially the young people invited, into the workshop. This will be conducted in isiXhosa with English translation as the majority of persons present speak isiXhosa as a first language. This will be followed by an informal 5-8 min sharing on the situation of young persons in relation to Interfer, Raak Wys and the Pivot Collective
1:30-1:45pm	Short Break
1:45-2:30pm	Poetry performance by Siphokazi Jonas and Lisa Julie
2:30-3:30pm	Workshop session facilitated by Clowns Without Borders (Suzan Eriksson, Sibongile Tsaonyane, Andiswa Mgedle, Anabel Morgan) In this session we will work in groups to talk about/act out/complete/draw or write about our responses to these proposals (you can pick just one): <i>In my next life I ...</i> <i>What I most wanted to tell you today was.....</i> By the end of the time, each group will have prepared a five-minute response to one or both of these propositions, in any form—a story, a poem, a drama, a chant. Remember: Stories are fictions that get us to truths.
3:30-4:00pm	Tea/Coffee
4:00-5:00pm	Nosiphiwo Lawrence, Elleke Boehmer, Zimpande Kawanu Report back with presentations of the workshop responses. This will begin with performances including of poetry and dance from the groups. Each group will have a representative who will be able to report on the day workshop’s activities to the discussion across the next two days.

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Day Two: Monday 2 March

9:00-9:30am	Welcome and Introduction: Elleke Boehmer, Chris Desmond, Zimpande Kawanu, Hillary Musarurwa In this session we will all introduce ourselves briefly and talk about what we hope to achieve with the workshop. Workshop participants include researchers, youth workers, and story and theatre practitioners. We will facilitate the idea of exploring ideas and interventions through conversation and interaction.
9:30-10:30am	Empowerment through story Jess Auerbach, Lesley Gittings, Nosiphiwo Lawrence, Musa Kika, Sikelela Kwatsha and Litha Samson (Ubuntu Trends youth group). This session begins to focus on the workshop's core ideas about how stories and performances empower us. Each participant named above is asked to talk for up to 5 minutes – a flash presentation – about a story that has helped themselves or others in their lives: why did it do so? What was it about the story (poem, song, speech, etc.) that worked for you? Please note: we will keep strictly to time. Examples might be drawn in from the Sunday performance workshop if appropriate.
10:30-11:00am	Coffee/Tea Break
11:00-12:30am	Narrative is different—methodologies session Isang Awah, Clowns Without Borders, Siphokazi Jonas, Lisa Julie, Isaac Ndlovu, Elona Toska When we talk about stories, identity and interventions, what stories exactly are we pointing to? In this session, different story practitioners including therapists, performers, poets, literary critics and historians are invited to talk briefly about story: story as practice, story as therapy, story as point of view, but especially stories to do with or involving adolescents. Please speak for no longer than 5 minutes highlighting stories, anecdotes, very short case studies, research highlights, poetry, or lyrics that capture something salient for adolescent wellbeing and health. Given time, pick one only please.
12:30-1:30pm	Lunch
1:30-3:30pm	BCM workshop session Nanjala Nyabola, Andile M-Afrika, Alude Mahali, Aleya Kassam In this session the speakers will explore how Steve Biko used story to persuade people to exercise agency in their lives and transform the narratives through which we understand ourselves and our relationships with others. In the second hour, we will break out into groups of 3 or 4 to look at the given extracts from Biko's <i>I write what I like</i> . Questions to ask might include: what appeals to us about these ideas? What do we do when we are impacted? How might these new understandings of story and agency improve our interventions as researchers and policy-makers working with adolescents?
3:30-4:00pm	Tea and coffee/refreshments
4:00-5:00pm	Plenary session (report back from the Biko session) Using flip-charts and other visual responses we ask what have we learned this afternoon about story and agency. How does this relate to the stories that young people tell about themselves, and the stories others tell about them? Anything new, anything confirmed? Groups from the previous session will report back.
5:00pm	Group Dinner Group dinner at Community House

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Day Three: Tuesday 3 March

9:30-11:30am	Collective stories Ubah Farah, Kingwa Kamencu, Noella Moshi, Boniface Mwangi, Pretty Sakeni and Sibongiseni Sakeni (from youth group, Lesedi Arts), Yanga Totyi (Ikamva Youth), Cathy Ward In this session we look at collective stories, the stories that nations, societies and other groupings tell about themselves. In the first hour, using examples from South Africa, Kenya, Somalia and elsewhere, the presenters are asked to address one or more of these main questions (for 5 minutes only): How did these collective stories become powerful? How do people relate to them? Can we see these stories changing over time and drawing in new people? In the second hour we will break into groups and respond to these presentations and questions. Each group will be asked to report on one story to the session that follows.
11:30-12:00pm	Refreshment break
12:00-1:00pm	Reporting back from session above and discussion, led by the presenters above.
1:00-2:00pm	Lunch
2:00-4:00pm	Narrative and Intervention Chris Desmond, Archie Davies, Joanne Corrigall (Amantobazana), Ashley Ellis (Children Radio's Foundation rep), Nanjala Nyabola, Ferial Parker, Kathryn Watt Throughout we have been thinking about the question of how the stories we tell about adolescents and that adolescents tell about themselves might relate to intervention design. Here we start to move to the important and difficult question of how better understandings of narratives can improve interventions involving adolescents? How do stories impact on policy set-up and design?
4:00-4:15pm	Short break
4:15-5:00pm	Final plenary session Open agenda, revisiting core questions and new understandings arising from the two/three days' activities.

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Participants List

Name
Elleke Boehmer
Chris Desmond
Zimpande Kawanu
Hilary Musarurwa
Archie Davies
Siphokazi Jonas
Lisa Julie
Alude Mahali
Jess Auerbach
Isaac Ndlovu
Andile M-Afrika
Zimpande Kawanu
Elona Toska
Cathy Ward
Lorraine Sherr
Litha Samsam
Yves Makangila
Vincent Friday
Don Safari
Christian Mbombo
Nosipiwo Lawrence
Lesley Gittings
Isang Awah
Rebecca Maughan-Brown
Musa Kika
Noella Moshi
Boniface Mwangi
Aleya Kassam
Ubah Cristina Ali Farah
Kingwa Kamencu
Nanjala Nyabola
Ferial Parker
Pretty Lebohang Sakeni
Sikelela Kwatsha
Mathapelo Mafokeng
Clemence Petit-Perrot
Suzan Eriksson
Annabel Morgan
Sibongile Tsoanyane
Nabeel Peterson
Yanga Totyi
Joanne Corrigan

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Phiwokuhle Bless
Prince Lukho Noyila
Liyema Nomdidi
Sinesethu Beme
Nosipho Mpongwana
Devlin Matthews
Tendai Musarurwa
Andisiwe Senatse
Seithati Poni
Yesiko Kamvalethu
Renay Clarke
Ongezwa Citi
JT Juries
Siyasanga Sotyoshwa
Ashley Ellis