

# Introduction

## Achievement and Its Social Life

*Nicholas J. Long*  
*and*  
*Henrietta L. Moore*

It's a rainy winter's day in Atlanta, Georgia, and a weary anthropologist is heading for his flight. The subway train is lit a sickly yellow, and the figures in the carriage huddle into the corners of their seats, hands in their pockets and coats zipped up to the neck. It's the kind of journey on which even a quick, friendly smile could make all the difference. At first no one looks back. They focus their eyes on their knees, the floor, a point somewhere just outside the window. Then somebody meets his gaze – not exactly a reciprocation; a scowl. He turns away.

The journey drags on. But throughout, there is one person who is ready to lock eyes with him. She takes this train every day. She's a smiling, confident, attractive middle-aged woman and she's up there, on the wall. She's written a book – it's about how to unlock the secrets of success and how to be 'a winner' every single moment of every single day. She'd love the people on the train to read it. It could help them. They could unlock their potential. But, for today at least, none of the other passengers seem able to bring themselves to look at her.

He changes trains. A preacher is on the platform. The crowd needs to be warned – they might think we know what it means to 'achieve' – having a great job, a great salary, a great house, a great relationship. But these are earthly pleasures, these aren't 'true success.' True success means getting into the Kingdom of Heaven. They must repent, renounce their worldly ways and live good Christian lives. Then they will be true successes on Earth.

A few minutes later, at Hartfield-Jackson Airport, a billboard offers another perspective (Figure 0.1). Advertising the philanthropic clothing company Geoffrey Beene, it proudly declares that 'we measure success by how much we give away.' The slogan is a testimony to the millions of dollars raised by the company to fund charitable causes. But it is offset by a picture of an improbably thin woman in an open-backed black dress, averting her gaze from the attentions

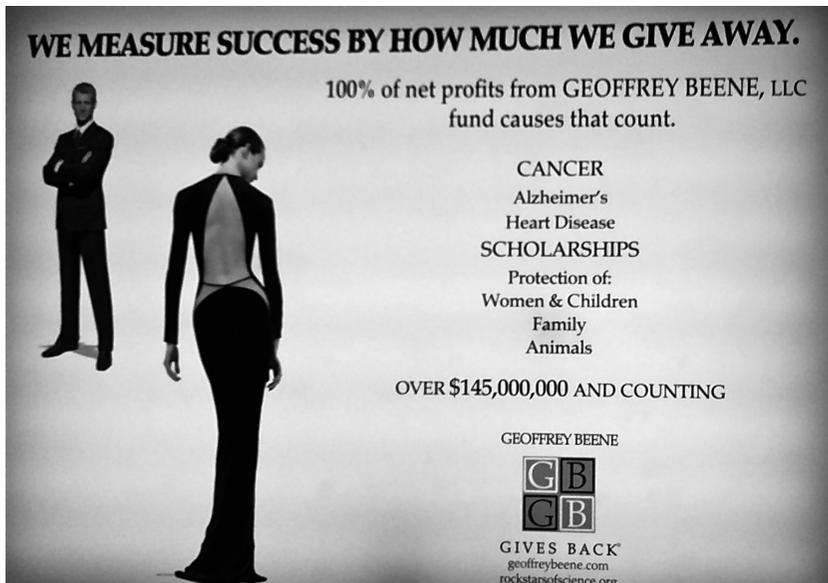


Figure 0.1 A billboard at Atlanta's Hartfield-Jackson Airport.

of a handsome blond man. The advert is arresting, but also unsettling. Are we meant to think that this woman is a success because of how much she is able to 'give away'? And what exactly is she 'giving away'? The skin her sylph-like figure is allowing her to reveal? Or something else...?

One journey in Atlanta. Thirty minutes. And yet a trip saturated by images, injunctions and appeals to 'achieve' and find 'success'. A trip filled with differing visions of what 'success' might actually comprise, but with a clear consensus that it is something that one should want to obtain. In some ways, of course, the journey is exceptional – a strange confluence of achievement-related incidents that befell an academic who just happened to be editing a volume on the social life of achievement. Yet it is a journey that any of us could have taken, and the sort of journey that many of us have probably been on, whether or not we were aware of it at the time.

The language of 'achievement', in fact, has become one of the defining features of the contemporary moment. As people are faced with the pressures of neoliberal exhortations to become ideal worker-citizens on the one hand, and on the other are obliged to navigate an increasingly austere economic situation following a devastating global financial crisis, achievement can seem to be the perfect solution, guaranteeing both the security and the worth of themselves and their loved ones. Such a perception is backed up by both the authority of a sizeable and globally circulating academic discourse on 'achievement' from within the social sciences (notably the discipline of psychology, but also anthropology and sociology to a lesser degree), and a burgeoning international self-help industry. Indeed, the British media notes that during the recent

economic downturn, self-help book sales increased by 25 per cent at a time when overall book sales were falling.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite this, achievement is so often not the solution that people hope it will be – a realisation that prompts us to consider in more detail how, why and when achievement both manages and fails to live up to its promise, and the ways in which such an enquiry might not only illuminate contemporary times, but also enrich the notions of efficacy, agency, motivation and selfhood implicit in current social science.

### **The Social Life of Achievement**

One of the challenges in writing about achievement is that the central object of the enquiry proves remarkably resistant to definition. For what is ‘an achievement’? Much of the literature is quick to take such phenomena as academic attainment, sporting prowess or business success as synonymous with ‘achievement’, but as anthropologists we know that this may not always be how they are experienced by people on the ground. Moreover, we know that often the things that are seen as ‘achievements’ for some people might seem entirely trivial, ridiculous or even horrific to those around them. For a serial insomniac, getting to sleep without medication could be a remarkable achievement yet it is something that most of us take for granted. Seemingly ‘inconsequential’ events, such as giant vegetable contests or winning a local domino drive, can be incredibly significant for those involved in them. A company turning around its fortunes and boosting shareholder profits can be seen as an achievement from one point of view, but as the ruthless exploitation of its workers on the other: nothing to be proud of.

In this volume, then, we are not interested in developing any normative definitions about what is, or is not, an achievement. Rather we see achievements as emerging through affective and evaluative engagement with things that have been done in the world, either by oneself or by others. Such assessments, and what is at stake in them, are necessarily contingent on the particular historical and geographic circumstances in which they take place. Thus, although a present-anchored reading of the past might suggest that human beings have always counted ‘achievement’ amongst their primary concerns, it is important to remember that what was at stake in such arenas as the Roman gladiatorial ring, the medieval tournament or the Renaissance quest for learning was distinct, if not unrelated, to what achievements in the fields of sports, science or combat might signify today.<sup>2</sup> Equally, as this volume will make clear, the significance and implications of ‘achievement’ in contemporary societies are highly variable – not only between more ‘individualistic’ and more ‘communitarian’ settings (the distinction most popular within social psychology) but, more strikingly still, between populations in former imperial metropolises and those in the former colonies, those whose ancestors were slaves, and those who were or are a subordinated proletariat.

Achievement's contingent and socially embedded character is one reason why we choose to write of 'the social life of achievement'. But there is much more at stake in that phrase than simply alluding to different definitions and contestations that the term 'achievement' might attract. Rather, we are seeking to ground our enquiry into achievement and its effects in a deep and nuanced understanding of human sociality. As we have argued elsewhere (Long and Moore 2013; Long forthcoming), human beings are always already emplaced in a dynamic matrix of relations with other humans, non-humans and an enviroing world. These relations are necessarily ones of interdependence, co-production and co-constitution: they are formative of the subject but they are also something upon which the subject can reflect and which he or she may subsequently transform through his or her own creative and ethical endeavours. Processes of self-making and self-stylisation, of which both striving and managing to achieve are a part, thus need to be understood in relation to the specific ways in which subjects at particular historical moments understand themselves, the entities with which they share the world, and the relations between them.

Thus even in a setting where everyone subscribes to the same cultural definition of achievement – as, say, a high mark in a school exam – the ways in which achievement is lived out and experienced will vary widely between a pupil who feels compelled to prove that she is the top of her class, a pupil hoping that a high mark will secure him a scholarship at the university of his choice, or a pupil desperate to please his teachers. Given this, however, a second point becomes relevant. As Moore (2011: 76) has emphasised, 'you can never completely know yourself and nor can you completely know the other'. As such, the relations between self and others that subjects seek to cultivate and transform through achievement are 'set up in fantasy, based on a series of identifications and their circulations ... [and] shot through with social imaginaries and relays of power' (ibid.: 76).

It is important to emphasise that these fantasised relations exist at all temporalities and scales. When a student hopes that a high-scoring degree might earn the approval of a cold, expectant parent, it is clear that the anticipated future relationship between parent and child is a fantasised one, but the present 'cold' relationship, based on a long history of identifications, projections and introjections, is no less fantasmatic in character. Moreover, self–other relations are scalable, which is to say that whilst some of them might be 'premised on detailed empirical knowledge of shared intimacies and spaces, ... others are mediated by more distant institutions, structures and imaginaries' (ibid.: 78). The others with whom the self is in relation might be those close to hand, but they can equally be very far flung, as when Guyanese men of low socio-economic standing train songbirds in pursuit of a 'reputation' that will affirm their worth relative to the national elite (Mentore, this volume), or Indonesians take part in competitions hoping this will equip them with the skills needed to be 'globally competitive' (Long, this volume). Indeed, as noted above, the contemporary

moment seems to be marked very widely by cases of people whose relations to their own achievement are partially or wholly set up in messianic fantasies of attracting wealth or acquiring a sense of personal worth; expectations that find their roots in discourses of the self-made man and the American Dream, that can help to explain achievement's powerful appeal, but also illuminate the potential for disillusionment and frustration when it eventually occurs. An enquiry into the social life of achievement thus demands that we interrogate the factors and processes that underpin the specific ways in which achievement has become an aspect of particular human subjects' imaginative and fantasmatic engagements with self and others. Doing so demands an in-depth and ethnographically grounded understanding of the matrix of relations within which a human subject is emplaced: a matrix which includes but cannot be reduced to the cultural traditions, institutionalised discourses and political-economic regimes that have preoccupied previous anthropologies of achievement.

The second reason we are drawn to the terminology of 'the social life of achievement' is that it reminds us that individuals' relations with achievement have, as it were, lives of their own that are worthy of being documented and scrutinised. The social life of achievement is an ongoing trajectory that rolls forward over time, as the self comes to be understood in new ways, as new relations are forged, and as old relations transform in character. And amongst the many events that can contribute to this ongoing process of recasting achievement's place in the subject's imaginative engagement with the world, one stands out for its empirical and theoretical interest: actually achieving.

The things that happen when someone achieves are often not what anyone would expect, opening up unforeseen ways of imagining the self, both in its own right and in relation to others. Norman, the retired miner in Alecky Blythe's 2012 documentary play about a talent show in the economically depressed British town of Stoke-on-Trent, is so moved by reaching the semi-finals and the applause that his performance receives that he skips about the stage and asks out loud the question that Blythe chose as the title of her work: 'Where have I been all my life?'<sup>3</sup> Testimonials for college courses and life-coaching point to similar new horizons of, as well as structural opportunities for, self-making – as in the case of Nathan Keen, a student enrolled in the 'Achieving Together' programme at a vocational college in Walsall:

The best moment at College was when I received my first qualification and seeing the 'pass' on the certificate. This gave me the confidence to go further and take even more qualifications ... My achievements at College gave me the idea to help others in a similar situation to do the same. I am now due to start a job as a Classroom Assistant ... I'm nowhere near where I want to be yet, I've now got the determination to go that extra step further and see what else I can achieve.<sup>4</sup>

In other cases, the new understandings of self and sociality that achievement engenders can prove rather more painful. The American playwright Tennessee Williams found that, after years of struggling to 'make it' as a writer, his eventual

Broadway success with *The Glass Menagerie* plunged him into a deep depression. He described himself as suffering a sense of ‘spiritual dislocation’, becoming sick at the sight of his Manhattan hotel room, and feeling so removed from the world that he could no longer taste the difference between the chocolate sauce and the gravy on his room-service tray (Williams [1945] 2009: 33). ‘A well of cynicism rose in me’, he wrote, ‘conversations all sounded like they had been recorded years ago and were being played back on a turntable. Sincerity and kindness seemed to have gone out of my friends’ voices. I suspected them of hypocrisy. I stopped calling them, stopped seeing them’ (ibid.: 33). Such experiences, which Williams (ibid.: 34–35) attributed to being tyrannised by his ‘public self’, prompted him to designate success ‘a catastrophe’.

It is obvious from these examples that achieving can engender new forms of imaginative engagement with self and others that are transformative, profoundly affecting and highly diverse. Yet to date, the social sciences have failed to develop a satisfactory comparative framework that can illuminate how and why achieving might have such diverse effects, or that can account for the differences between specific cases. That is precisely what this volume sets out to do.

We therefore begin this introduction by outlining the most dominant theoretical approaches that have hitherto characterised the anthropological study of achievement, with a view to examining why they proved unable to account for the extreme variation in human subjects’ experiences of achieving. We then explain how the limitations of these previous approaches might be overcome by turning to our notion of the social life of achievement, grounded in the understanding of human sociality as a dynamic relational matrix that human beings navigate through ethical endeavour. To understand how the social life of achievement rolls forward, we argue, requires a theorisation of the specific character of achievements as events: events that give rise to particular forms of affective, linguistic and social knowledge which in turn underpin transformations in the ways in which human subjects conceptualise themselves and exist alongside others in the world.

## **Early and Current Anthropologies of Achievement: A Critical Review**

### *The Need for Achievement*

In the 1930s, Harvard psychologist Henry Murray ([1938] 2008) initiated a bold and influential attempt to develop a psychology of personality that would allow him to explain why individual participants in his experiments would either follow or stand apart from the general trends in the group under study. Concerned that conventional methods could not explain the causal mechanisms underpinning concrete events, he attempted to develop a new approach, investigating the ways in which research participants pre- or sub-consciously

apprehended the world, so that their behaviour in experiments could be interpreted in the context of their personalities. Murray did this by tracing the relative balance of each participant's viscerogenic and psychogenic needs, drawing from a long (and supposedly exhaustive) list including the need for sex, the need for order, the need for abasement and the need for achievement.

Murray described the need for achievement as a need 'to overcome obstacles, to exercise power, to strive to do something difficult as well and as quickly as possible', and singled it out for special status as 'an elementary Ego need which alone may prompt any action or be fused with any other need' (ibid.: 81). This approach was to have lasting ramifications for how achievement would be conceptualised within the social sciences, suggesting it was something that was needed by human subjects, albeit to varying degrees, and thus as something that one could be more or less oriented towards, and more or less motivated to obtain. Reading Murray today, we can see that his model did also allow for a theory of why achievement might affect people differently when it occurred, since those with a high need for achievement would presumably experience pleasure, calm or relief upon achieving, whilst those whose need for achievement was relatively low would be more likely to be unmoved by their accomplishments. They might even experience a decrease in well-being if their achievements meant that other psychogenic needs (such as a need for abasement) were going unmet.

For those researchers taking their cue from Murray, however, the elaboration and testing of such hypotheses seemed a less pressing concern than trying to develop more rigorous causal mechanisms of how and why human beings came to have different levels of the various psychogenic needs Murray and his associates had identified. As we will explain below, the consequences of this particular intellectual problematisation were twofold. Firstly, a host of new ideas about what made somebody 'achievement oriented' were generated in the academy, from where they then travelled outwards into various domains of public life, forever transforming the ways in which people would conceptualise their own relationships with achievement. Secondly, achievement's analytical status as a 'need object' was implicitly sustained, along with an associated set of assumptions about how achievement affected people when it occurred.<sup>5</sup>

### *Culture, Achievement and Anthropology*

Murray's *Explorations in Personality* was a book largely concerned with the classification of personality and its constituent psychogenic needs. Reviewing it in *American Anthropologist*, John Dollard (1941) praised this as a useful 'first step' but pointed to two 'painful' gaps in Murray's account. Not only had Murray failed to provide a detailed account of how psychogenic needs were learned (or otherwise acquired), he had also ignored the question of 'social structure', much to the dismay of Dollard who imagined that 'some very interesting correlations

between specific needs and class background, mobility, and the like might have been forthcoming' (ibid.: 120). Although Dollard himself never launched a detailed enquiry into this possibility, his remarks foreshadowed the most significant way in which anthropologists and social psychologists would think about the problem of achievement for much of the twentieth century.

Ten years after Dollard's review was published, the question of how social and cultural circumstances might influence one's need for achievement was taken up in earnest by Harvard psychologist David McClelland. Writing at the heyday of modernisation theory, he argued in his seminal work *The Achieving Society* (1961), that the economic development of nations could be attributed to the levels of the 'need for Achievement' (which he labelled *n* Achievement, sometimes abbreviated to *nAch*) amongst their populations. For McClelland, *n* Achievement was believed to engender a self-reliant, risk-taking entrepreneurial character – exactly the kind of mindset that modernisation theorists (e.g., Rostow 1960) considered to be essential for economic growth in the developing world. 'Achievement motivation' was thus recast within his work as something that was not just an individual characteristic but an attribute of entire groups of people, a move that naturally led to the question of why some populations appeared to have higher average levels of *n* Achievement than others. Rejecting the tendency (prevalent at the time) to attribute these apparent differences to racial, genetic or climatic differences, McClelland sought to develop explanations at the level of 'national culture', suggesting that particular forms of child-rearing and religious practice (particularly those marked by individualism and 'positive mysticism') encouraged the kind of psychological dispositions needed to be self-reliant and entrepreneurial. Thus, even as McClelland's work marked a new interest in the topic of cultural difference, it did so within a framework in which the ideal 'achieving society' was strikingly Anglo-American.<sup>6</sup>

Although McClelland is usually thought of as somebody who wrote about achievement motivation rather than the consequences of achievement, the latter concern in fact lay at the heart of the causal mechanism by which he believed subjects actually acquired the achievement motive:

All motives are learned, and develop out of repeated affective experiences connected with certain types of situations and types of behaviour. In the case of achievement motivation, the situations should involve 'standards of excellence', presumably impressed on the child by the culture ... Behaviour should involve either competition with those standards of excellence or attempts to meet them which, if successful, produce positive affect or, if unsuccessful, negative affect. (McClelland et al. 1953: 275)

As Izard et al. (1966: 5) note, positive and negative affect in McClelland's work are 'inexorably identified with subjective pleasure and pain ... [experienced as a] diffuse autonomic reaction'. In other words, McClelland thought that there was something intrinsically pleasurable about meeting cultural standards, and that this pleasure would instigate 'approach' behaviour (a desire to experience achievement again). By contrast, the unpleasantness of failure would spur the

subject to avoid repeating such an experience – by striving for achievement. This pleasure/pain approach to motivation, widely referred to in psychological literature as the ‘hedonic principle’, might seem crude and generalising as an explanation for how someone comes to acquire a ‘need’ for achievement. Nevertheless, there is something exciting and provocative about McClelland’s ambitions in seeking to take seriously the developmental role that intense individual affective and embodied experiences might play in shaping behaviour and broader social trends, especially in the light of current anthropological theory, which invites us to pay more attention to moments of visceral and affective experience in our understanding of social forms. Certainly McClelland raises some intriguing possibilities that could have given rise to a more nuanced and modest theory of how experiences of achieving transform social life.

For many of his readers at the time, however – and certainly those within the discipline of anthropology – the questions of whether (and how) meeting a ‘standard of excellence’ really did engender positive affect, and whether such affect really did lead to the acquisition of a motive, were largely overlooked in favour of investigating whether ‘a culture’ was effective at impressing standards of excellence upon its children in the first place. Reboussin and Goldstein (1966: 740), for example, described their study of the Haskell Institute in Kansas as ‘compar[ing] the scores of Navaho [sic] Indians and White university students on an established measure of *n* achievement in order to verify previous statements that achievement motivation is not emphasised in Navaho [sic] culture’. (The Navajo actually turned out to have higher *n* Achievement scores than the White students – but rather than revoking their hypothesis, the authors instead concluded that their Navajo sample was ‘probably not representative’ [ibid.: 744].) In a similar vein, LeVine’s (1968) study of ‘dreams and deeds’ in Nigeria sought to test the hypothesis that the high status mobility of Ibo might lead to forms of child-raising that fostered *n* Achievement, in contrast to the feudal Hausa. Soon large numbers of researchers were taking up the idea that particular cultural arrangements might give rise to greater or lesser degrees of achievement motivation, and policy makers and intellectuals in both the developed and developing world drew on McClelland’s ideas to devise ways in which they might be able to press ‘standards of excellence’ upon, and raise achievement orientation amongst, their youth (see, e.g., Nandy 1987; Ford and Thomas 1997; Long, this volume).<sup>7</sup>

As research in the field intensified, both the monolithic portraits of ‘culture’ that had dominated McClelland’s work and the assumptions of a stable set of ‘needs’ and ‘drives’ that composed a subject’s ‘personality’ came under increasing critical scrutiny, with achievement motivation increasingly being understood not as a ‘personality trait’ but as the ongoing processual outcome of how any given human being interacts with and interprets the changing world around him or her (Weiner 1990: 620–21; Maehr 2008). This resulted in numerous sophisticated ethnographic studies of the evolving relationships between achievement motivation and the power relations, social imaginaries and

structural barriers with which people were faced at various stages of their lives (e.g., Ogbu 1987; Wilson 1991; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995). With Signithia Fordham's work (discussed below) standing out as a notable exception, however, such studies of achievement usually placed a heavy emphasis on the question of motivation, underplaying the question of what particular individuals – and those around them – actually experienced upon achieving, let alone the diverse ways in which that experience might transform their lives.

### *The Problematisation of Achievement*

A similar charge could be levelled against the most recent theoretical development in anthropological studies of achievement and motivation, which has been to investigate how individual engagements with achievement are shaped by the specific ways in which it has been problematised for them by particular constellations of power and knowledge. This approach is heavily indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, and his concept of problematisation, which refers to the process by which a 'domain of acts, practices and thoughts' comes to 'stand out from the general terrain of human life and experience', and 'emerge as an object of thought', prompting people to reflect on it and thereby develop 'a specific politics, a form of government of the self, and the elaboration of an ethics in regard to oneself' (Foucault 2000: 114; Moore 2011: 19). It is certainly true that this characterisation seems pertinent for the study of achievement in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a period in which achievement appears to have been very widely problematised, standing out from the terrain of human life more, perhaps, than ever before. This trend, though neither unique nor universal to contemporary times, can be linked to two factors that have caused achievement to 'lose its familiarity' and 'provoked difficulties around it' (Foucault 2000: 118). The first is the rise of broadly neoliberal forms of statecraft and governance, which place a growing burden on individuals, especially the young, to achieve so as to demonstrate their employability and thereby safeguard their own economic security. The second has been the global circulation of discourses of achievement psychology, many of which can be traced back to the influence of Murray, McClelland and other social scientists writing on the topic, which suggest that success – however defined – is intimately connected with one's attitude, mentality, mindset or culture.

Such discourses, and the common language they provide, establish achievement as a problem for both the work of government and the work of the self,<sup>8</sup> as has been revealed by studies focusing on everything from the 'competitiveness' policies that states have developed to ensure their population's market relevance (Krugman 1994; Bayly, Long, this volume), to the highly elaborated forms of self-government and self-regulation exhibited by individuals hoping to achieve (Demerath 2009, this volume; Davidson 2011). Moreover, it is clear that discourses of achievement can play a significant role in the constitution

of ethical life, a domain which encompasses the ‘experiences we have of ourselves’, ‘how we are constituted as subjects of our own knowledge’ and ‘the kinds of selves we are for ourselves and others’ (Moore 2011: 19). To see how deeply implicated achievement can be in both one’s self-understanding and the question of how to relate to others, one need look no further than the section of de Rond’s (2009) ethnography of a male rowing team at Cambridge University in which Jake, a 22-year-old American student hoping to row in the prestigious annual Oxford–Cambridge Boat Race, has suffered a setback in his training. Jake explains that:

Having lost my seat-race was like finding out something about myself – something I didn’t like seeing – I felt guilty – I felt guilty because I’d let my team-mates down, my friends, it’s this incredible feeling of loss ...

I had to ask myself all sorts of questions like ‘Can I really do this?’ and ‘How good am I really?’ and ‘What am I worth?’ – and did I really want the answers to those questions? What if I were to discover that I wasn’t good enough, is that something I could live with? ...

I like Colin and Oli and feel sad about having to compete with them for a place in the Blue Boat ... The fact that they were my friends meant that I knew things about them that could be conceived as insecurities that could work to my advantage, but I really didn’t want to exploit them – I mean even in my own thoughts – but the mind games I played with myself were so intense and I wanted so badly to get inside their heads and let them know I was the alpha male – it’s so confusing to mentally attack your friends – it drives you insane but sanity seemed like a small price to pay for something that I wanted so badly. (ibid.: 143–49)

Given that, as Jake’s candid remarks underscore, achievement can play such a crucial role in how people think of themselves and their relations to others, it is perhaps surprising that anthropologists working on achievement from a broadly Foucauldian perspective have placed their emphasis on questions of aspiration, anticipation and the imagination of achievement that is yet to come, rather than investigating what actually happens when this deeply wished-for achievement occurs. This is not to dismiss or trivialise the importance of achievement-related aspirations and desires (or indeed, earlier decades’ interest in ‘motivation’), which are without doubt a crucial dimension of contemporary subjectivity. However, we argue that their detailed investigation has been at the expense of a related but distinct problem. This is the *experience* of achievement: something that is both material and semiotic; concretely embodied and affectively charged, yet also known and elaborated through the work of fantasy and the imagination. It incorporates the question of whether expectations, hopes and desires are thwarted or met – but is not limited to this. It is an experience which can serve to reinforce (or challenge) definitions of achievement whilst also inflecting them with meanings that might form the basis of new interpretive beliefs. It is an experience that can have profound ramifications for the questions of aspiration and motivation but also for much more besides. The question we are now faced with is how to study it.

## Achievement as a Context of Cultural Invention

Although the McClellandian approach that set the course of much scholarship on achievement in the late twentieth century had a clearly articulated theory of achievement's consequences, its simplistic assumptions of success generating 'positive affect' do not stand up to close anthropological scrutiny. Not only does the evidence speak to the contrary, there is a regrettable conceptual blindness to the significance of context for determining achievement's affective (and other) outcomes. Building on the important work that has been done by applying Foucauldian notions of problematisation, self-formation and ethics to the question of aspiration, we might therefore advance an initial proposition that the consequences of achievement must themselves be understood in relation to the specific ways in which achievement has been problematised for a particular subject, and the specific forms of ethical self-formation to which that problematisation has given rise. Such processes have been integral in crafting the self that is now experiencing achievement, and thereby determine just what is at stake in any instance of success or failure.

Persuasive evidence to this effect can be found in Fordham's (1996) landmark study of the existential burdens and psychic trauma afflicting high-achieving Black schoolchildren at Capital High, a secondary school in Washington D.C. These pupils, Fordham explains, sought to parallel and even surpass the academic achievement of their White peers in an attempt to elevate and transform the meanings of African American humanness (*ibid.*: 236). In doing so, however, they had to conform (at least partly) to the practices and behaviours of dominant groups, and so risked being accused of 'acting White' and even of losing membership in the Black fictive kinship system (*ibid.*: 252). They had to navigate the contradictions between ideologies that valorised academic success, and those that saw 'authentic' Blackness as an achievement in itself, or being Black as something at which it was easy to fail (see also Phoenix 1998: 863). As a result, school success was both desirable and dangerous; and high-achievers' psyches were riddled with ambivalence, self-imposed conflict and self-doubt (Fordham 1996: 246–48). The point that merits underscoring here is that such dissonance proved so deeply troubling precisely because of how important academic achievement was to the students in their 'unswerving desire to reclaim and reconfigure their African humanness' (*ibid.*: 327). It was because 'pursuing academic success [was] a form of warfare' for them (*ibid.*: 235) that they became its casualties. Reading Fordham's ethnography from the theoretical position we are developing in this volume, one can see that the way the social life of achievement rolled forwards for these pupils has to be understood in terms of the distinctive ways in which achievement stood out as a problem for them.

Nevertheless, a focus on problematisation is not in itself enough to explain all of achievement's possible consequences, since it offers no tools through which to understand why the experience of achieving should so often prove unexpected and counterintuitive, even by the parameters of subjects' own political and

ethical reasoning. These are cases that are much more difficult to unravel than those in which self-evidently unrealistic expectations go (traumatically, but unsurprisingly) unmet. We might think of such examples as when competitiveness policies prove successful, but the newly competitive population feels underwhelmed (Sweeney 2003: 140), a schizophrenia patient who reports that his condition makes him feel numb at all times is taken aback by the unexpected boost of energy and sense of accomplishment he feels having scored highly in a quiz (Perivoliotis and Cather 2009: 824), or a pupil who proudly brings a trophy to school discovers she will henceforth be pilloried by her peers (Fordham 1996: 323). What all these cases reveal is that the way in which the social life of achievement rolls forward is always contingent on how the enviroing world – including one's own body and mind – responds to achievement, whether or not that is what one expects. What follows in achievement's wake affords opportunities for individuals to have new experiences of themselves, and to become a new object of knowledge for themselves and others. In short, it can serve to *reproblematise* achievement – and the social sciences need to develop a framework for how and why this should be the case.

When an achievement takes place, new knowledge is created about the achiever in relation to him- or herself: at a minimum the realisation that he or she has accomplished a certain feat within the world, and that he or she has the capacity to do so. It may also generate new knowledge in relation to those around him or her who either have or have not enjoyed the same achievement, either in the present instance or in the past. Following on from this, it can be seen that achievements should be understood as 'events' with the potential to rupture or entrench previous knowledges through their witnessing and acclamation – as per Caroline Humphrey's (2008) anthropological restyling of Alain Badiou (2006). In other words, achievements offer an opportunity for cultural invention, in which both subjectivity and sociality might be recast.

While human subjects always exist in a dynamic relational matrix, one of the most important features of human subjectivity is the human capacity for virtuality – for reflecting on the state of things as they are, and envisaging how they might be otherwise (Moore 2012). Henrietta Moore (2011: 16) has developed the concept of 'the ethical imagination' to describe these 'forms and means ... through which individuals imagine relationships to themselves and to others', arguing that the ethical imagination is a primary site of cultural invention because although ethical practices are proposed, suggested and imposed upon individuals by their social environs, and forms of subjectification are linked to the normative and with distributions of power, these are not, and cannot be, absolutely determining processes. The sharply variable and often unexpected affective responses to achievement are precisely evidence of this. Instead, she writes, 'what remains open, unforecasted, unfinished is present in its active possibility' (ibid.: 16) and 'it is a feature of human subjectivity that we are born into and make ourselves under conditions that we may then choose to transform' (ibid.: 18).

Two points warrant particular emphasis at this juncture. The first concerns the multifaceted character of the ethical imagination and the precise nature of the 'choice' to transform or maintain the conditions of one's being in the world. As Moore argues, although conscious thought, linguistic reasoning and decision-making are crucial elements of the ethical imagination, so are affect, performance and the placement and use of the body; identification and fantasy even proceed through forms of unknowing and incomprehensibility (ibid.: 16; see also Long 2012). Thus, staying true to Moore's expansive definition of the ethical imagination, contributors to this volume examine how achievement builds, sustains or dissolves attachments to an energetic, affective and material world, even to the point where an attachment might be perpetuated that is actively doing the subject harm, as in Aronofsky's (2010) Hollywood melodrama, *Black Swan*.<sup>9</sup> Contributors also explore the forms of ethical, imaginative and interpretive reasoning that achievement can prompt, and the implications of the language in which it is expressed – all of which are themselves embodied processes with their own distinct affectivities (Long 2012: 92). These are all factors that shape the subject's conceptualisation of, and imaginative engagement with the self, others and the very social world in which he or she inheres.

Secondly, achievement events are not just events for the achiever. This is a point that has already been highlighted by researchers in the field of psychological anthropology, who have argued that the witnessing and identification of something that 'some group of humans ... [have] agreed ... will count as an achievement' establishes cognitive schemas of 'achievement' that might then be internalised by achievers and those around them, instigating future action, and functioning as a goal (D'Andrade 1992: 35; see also Strauss 1992a, 1992b). However, such an emphasis on the cognitive domain at the expense of questions of affect, feeling, attachment and investment, let alone the relational matrix within which these schemas were learned and subsequently redeployed, leaves us with an incomplete understanding of achievement events. Grounding achievement in a theory of human sociality underscores that those around the achiever, who now comes to be viewed as 'an achiever,' have also found their matrix of relations to have been recast, and their ethical imaginations will guide how they come to reconceptualise their relations to themselves and those around them – including their relationship with the achiever. Whilst being identified as an achiever affords a subject the possibility of imagining a new way in which he or she relates to others, it equally renders him or her open to being imagined and fantasised differently by others – a situation that appears to underlie many cases of ambivalence or guilt in the wake of achievement (e.g., Spurlock 1985; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995: 74–79; Williams 2009), but which can also be responsible for the joy and delight that achievers take in their success (Long 2007: 96–98). As such, and as all our contributors seek to highlight, achieving is at once intensely personal, relational and intersubjective, and can have ramifications on one's life and the matrix of relations one inhabits, both in the short-to-medium term and over the course of one's entire life.

At the core of these processes of cultural invention, however, are the various new forms of knowledge and understanding that achievement elicits. In order to develop a more systematic framework for studying the social life of achievement, we have ordered the chapters of this book so as to understand more deeply the nature and effects of the three principal forms of knowing that we have identified as unfolding in achievement's wake. The first is the affective, physical, embodied forms of experience that arise in the immediate aftermath of achievement; the second is the linguistic knowledge that transmits information about the achievement of oneself and others; and the third is the knowledge of how one's relations in the world have been maintained or transformed by achieving. By doing so, and by putting the ethnographic contributions highlighted by our contributors into a critical dialogue with emergent approaches in the sociology and psychology of achievement, we hope not only to shed light on how to explain the striking diversity of achievement experiences documented within the volume, we also seek to develop a fresh conceptual and methodological framework for researching 'achievement' within the social sciences.

### **The Sense of Achievement**

The affective pleasure of achievement is supposed to be one of its most intoxicating properties. The idea that meeting standards of excellence engenders positive affect – pleasure, satisfaction or a 'feel-good factor' – has been one of the most prevalent assumptions underpinning diverse theories of achievement and motivation (see, e.g., Kruger 1933; McClelland 1961; Paul 1990: 439; D'Andrade 1992: 23). Indeed, even psychologists who have noted that achieving can very quickly give rise to feelings of anxiety, ambivalence or depression are willing to concede that, at the moment of achieving, it probably felt good (Clance and Imes 1978: 244; Dweck 1999: 112). Whether achievement always involves such immediate positive affect, whether that affect is always of the same variety, and why achieving feels good or bad are thus all questions that warrant closer attention.

Anthropology's contribution is particularly exciting given that psychologists' own re-evaluations of the hedonic principle (the idea that people are driven towards the pleasures of achievement and away from the pain of failure) have tended to focus on internal mental processes rather than the interactions between subjects and the social world around them. Higgins (1997), for example, encourages his readers to focus on the different forms of 'regulatory focus', 'regulatory anticipation' and 'regulatory reference' that underpin diverse instances of motivated striving, noting that the pleasure of securing a success which is valued for its own sake may be qualitatively different to the pleasure elicited by avoiding failure through having been successful. But Higgins's approach, like those to which it is responding, radically decontextualises the subject experiencing this pleasure.<sup>10</sup> What is left out of view is that which is

immediately apparent to any anthropologist observing the joys or woes of achievement on even an individual scale: its embodiment, its emplacement and its materiality.

Quite the opposite perspective to Higgins's can be found in contemporary discussions of affect in cultural theory (e.g., Clough 2008; Venn 2010). These exhort us to view the human body as 'matter in-formation', and to analyse the ways in which affective energies are transmitted between it and other materials in the world – an approach which frames the question of why achievement feels good (or not) in an entirely different way. As elaborated elsewhere (Long and Moore 2013), we would caution against the tendency to view affect as autonomous or pre-social, advocating instead an ethnographic attention to how it is anticipated, channelled and comes to attach to particular bodies with 'structured precision' (Hemmings 2005: 562). Thinking about how, why and when achieving bodies are affected in certain – and perhaps unexpected – ways contributes to such an endeavour whilst also foregrounding the value of material-semiotic approaches towards the question of how the social life of achievement rolls forward. Equally, by examining how attachments to living – and imagined relations to the self and others – are sustained by the circulation of affect and attunement to atmospheres within a world that is at once material and social, we are able to open up nuanced questions about what exactly we recognise as an achievement, and the repercussions it can come to have over the course of an entire life.

Kathleen Stewart's chapter offers precisely such an analysis, developing a cartography of her mother Claire's existence in the world. Unlike conventional anthropological approaches to achievement, which she intimates may often be too quick to draw theoretically informed connections between thinking subjects, concepts and the world, Stewart advocates a slowing of theory, which allows for a compositional approach in which the anthropologist can create 'descriptive eddies' and 'speculative attunement[s] that at least aspir[e] to align with the commonplace labours of becoming sentient to whatever is happening'. This proves to be a highly productive way of thinking about achievement. It foregrounds the question of how circulating forces (of which the pleasures of the hedonic principle are but one) come to 'take on forms', in Stewart's words, 'animat[ing] a life but also incit[ing] the labours of its production'. By then charting these worldings over the course of a single life, she draws our attention to their patterns and regularities – as well as their disjunctures and displacements – and the way these lines of a life might become prismatic, and scored onto forms of attunement. In particular, Stewart highlights the pain of ageing, illness and dying – in which the world that a subject has made matter slowly abandons her or him, an element of the social life of achievement's relentless trajectory that is only made crueller by the subject's attachment to his or her efficacy, and which Stewart both identifies and evokes as unspeakably sad.

Stewart thus shows how the sense of achievement emerges through participation in a world that is both energetic and material: as Stewart remarks,

a life's elements 'have a radical materiality that literally matters', and anthropologists are especially well-placed to attend to this and, by examining how and why it matters, broaden the horizons of what has hitherto been conceptualised as 'achievement psychology'. Rebecca Cassidy's account of Brian, a British gambling professional does just this, by studying how externally generated shifts in the material and political economic circumstances of betting can transform the affective experience – and motivational force – of achievement. In the late 1990s, Brian made his money by laying bets at racecourses. At the time he emphasised that this was a strictly professional pursuit – and that success was a result of knowledge, hard work and dispassionate rational calculations. There was thus no place for him, in his own self-representations, for the affective thrills that McClelland thought made achievement so motivationally compelling.

Cassidy compares Brian's behaviour on the racecourse with his betting activity in the late 2000s, which was conducted at home using the online betting exchange Betfair. While Brian made comparable amounts of money using Betfair as he did at the racecourse, working on a computer and never having any days where he could celebrate a 'big win' made it 'less exciting' for him – so much so that he eventually retired. As Cassidy argues, this illustrates starkly the difference between 'winning' and 'achievement'; the sense of the latter hinged not on financial outcomes but on a distinctive temporality of success, emplacement on the race course, and a bodily affect of 'excitement' – even as this was something that he sought to suppress or deny. Thus, just as Appadurai (1986) argued that the value and identity of an object could be entirely transformed as it moved through different contexts, or 'regimes of value', Cassidy urges us to think of how people relate differently to outcomes – such as winning £1,000 by gambling – when they take place within discrete 'regimes of achievement' to which one is variably attached and attuned.

Such affective attachments and attunements are far from divorceable from the historically specific social imaginaries and relays of power that pervade particular contests, as emphasised by Laura Mentore's analysis of Guyanese 'birdsport'. Birdsport is an activity in which two finches are pitted against each other in a 'race' to complete a certain number of songs in the fastest time possible. Victory in the races between the birds is largely attributed to luck, thereby allowing birdsport to serve as an egalitarian space in which any participant is able to win, and assert their integrity and worth. Moreover, birdsport affords multiple avenues for men to cultivate their 'reputation' – a concept that developed under conditions of colonial rule, and which emphasises creative individualism within contexts that are equally accessible to all men. Passion, and in particular the robust and passionate use of the human voice, is thus a prime component of 'reputation'; so too is the skilful maintenance of relations and connections. Sourcing finches from indigenous communities (and 'passionately' fathering children in the process), smuggling them to the city, or building such a relationship with them during training that they sing with energy

and zeal during races, are all ways in which reputation can be achieved through birdsport.

For Mentore, however, what ultimately makes birdsport so popular is the passionate aurality of the bird race, and the relational transmission of affect that it involves. This allows participants to 'embody such passion as an aspect of their own social being that transcends the more restrictive categories of person to which they are bound in other facets of life', and so plays an important role in postcolonial practices of self-making. Once again the world's radical materiality, and the attachments and attunements that this materiality engenders, come to the fore, but within the context of a world of affective resonance and cultural meaning that has its own deep history in colonial and postcolonial power relations and the identifications, fantasies and desires to which those have given rise. These are factors that anthropologists can highlight to explain more comprehensive understandings of how achievement events make people feel. But those instant feelings are only the start of the story, and it is to achievement's impacts on forms of semantic knowledge regarding self and sociality that we now turn.

### **Putting Achievement into Words**

However palpably achievement is felt, the moment at which it is recognised as 'achievement' is by definition one of narrativisation – even if it is only a narrative that one tells oneself. This, of course, was the point D'Andrade (1992) was making when he wrote of achievement as a cognitive schema – but in contrast to his view that this is foremost a cognitive process, the contributors to this volume are interested in exploring such recognition and narrativisation in the context of dynamic matrices of relations, imaginative and ethical engagement with the world, and the fantasmatic processes of intersubjectivity. This is because the act of recognising and narrating 'achievement' is not only informed by subjects' previous experiences of the social world (D'Andrade's 'cultural models'), but also highly consequential for the social world because, as the next three chapters argue, both deliberate and unthinking practices of narrating and recognising achievement can profoundly transform one's imaginative engagement with the self and others.

One of the most fundamental narratives within mainstream discourses of achievement is that of praise – a practice often assumed by educationalists, policy makers and the public to engender positive affect, and thereby boost an achiever's self-esteem and motivate them to continue on a cycle of success (see, for example, the comments of the teachers cited in Demerath, this volume). Although the ethnographic record throws up cases of situations in which praise is a source of discomfort, misery or shame (e.g., Harkins 1990), in recent years a growing body of work within social and developmental psychology has indicated that, even in contexts where praise is normatively desirable, matters may be less

straightforward than praise-givers might assume. In such settings, while praise of any kind usually leads to an immediate burst of pleasure and pride, there are striking differences in the long-term consequences of praise focused on an outcome (the achievement itself), the process by which that outcome was achieved, or the qualities of the person responsible (Corpus and Lepper 2007). Significantly, this is not simply a case of individuals experiencing affective overstimulation from their success (cf. Hultberg 1985), but is related directly to the semantic content of praise language. Each distinct form of praise – particularly when foisted upon young children – can introduce implicit theories and social imaginaries of causality and ability that then prove formative for how the achiever imaginatively engages with the world around him or her.

Such distinctions in language use can be remarkably subtle. For example, Cimpian et al. (2007) chart the differential effects of praising children's artwork in ways that are generic of the child in question ('You're a good drawer!') and non-generic commentaries on process ('You did a good job drawing!'). The children that were praised generically displayed more extreme emotional reactions in the face of criticism because, the authors argue, generic praise implies performance is underpinned by a stable ability; subsequent mistakes are thus thought to reflect upon this and so lead to a significant decrease in motivation (see also Mueller and Dweck 1998; Dweck 1999; Kamins and Dweck 1999). Further studies have suggested that a similar effect occurs when children hear the achievements of others being talked about in generic terms such as 'math whiz' (Heyman 2008), and that, when exposed to a mixture of praise types, as little as 25 per cent generic praise can lead to demotivation in the face of difficulty (Zentall and Morris 2010). Such studies thus suggest that the semantic terms in which achievement is described have a major effect on the way in which the social life of achievement rolls forward, a point which in turn informs the long-standing interest in questions of 'achievement motivation' and 'achievement orientation'.

To date, most of the research conducted in this field has been experimental in nature, asking children to role-play with puppets or imagine how they might react in hypothetical situations. The danger of this approach is that it extracts experimental subjects from the dynamic relational matrices within which achievements, praise and theories of ability come to acquire meaning in daily life. Observational and ethnographic studies therefore offer an important complement to laboratory-based work on cognitive development. Their full potential, however, can only be realised through a deep and rich investigation into how an ethically imaginative subject engages with the context in which he or she is found.

Nicholas Long's contribution to this volume moves in this direction. Working in the recently created Indonesian province of Kepri, he shows how the theories of self, confidence and behaviour of the province's young achievers are constantly evanescent and transforming as they engage with heavily politicised discourses of a regional 'human resources crisis'. While government policies rely on a

theory of achievement and its consequences that is directly inspired by McClelland, believing that high achievers will be motivated go-getters who go on to live prosperous and exemplary lives, thereby solving the human resources crisis, the reality is often more complex, with high achievers displaying extreme anxiety and self-doubt in the face of further challenges. Long argues that although such people's achievement is often praised in processual rather than generic terms – focusing on their hard work, discipline and religious devotion – the more consequential theory of self is one of constitution through relations, in which the inadequacies of Kepri's human and material resources are believed to be transferred to children who grow up in the region. As such, the very rhetoric of a human resources crisis which underpins provincial achievement policies inadvertently serves to terrify those who achieve within the context of Kepri about their latent inadequacies, whilst achievement in wider contexts (such as at national level) can lead to surprising re-evaluations of the region's quality through the accomplishments of the self it created. Long thus highlights how deploying various academic models of achievement and motivation within the field of policy might lead to unanticipated responses. Ultimately, as he shows, these come to include a stretching of the very parameters of what counts as achievement, engendering new experiences of attachment, attunement and alienation towards the world.

Whilst the *post hoc* narration of achievement can be responsible for transmitting implicit beliefs and knowledges in the way Long describes, it can also open up spaces for reflexivity and ethical practice – as argued by Joanna Cook in her analysis of a Thai meditation monastery in which attaining 'non-self' is the pinnacle of achievement. Cook notes that achievements are conventionally seen as objects – events, states or statuses – that can be pursued by a subject, and that such an assumption underpins cognitive anthropologists' accounts of goal schemas and their capacity to provide directive force (e.g. D'Andrade 1992). But when the telos of achievement is the very negation of the subject itself, a different frame of analysis is required. Building on Strauss's (1992b) analysis of the different ways in which goal schemas can be internalised, Cook suggests that there can come a point where a schema is so fully internalised that it is not only directive and motivational but constitutive or definitional. Thus rather than being seen as a cultural value which has directive force on action from without, Cook invites us to see 'non-self' as creatively recast in the relationships in which it is iterated.

These relationships include those between renouncers giving narrative accounts of their achievement of non-self, and the meditators who listen to them. Hagiographic narratives, which bespeak the spiritual attainment of the narrator, are crafted in such a way that it is impossible to distinguish between formulaic tropes of the genre and personal details relating to the speaker. Narrators therefore circumvent the paradox that they are appearing to give a 'personal' testimony of achieving 'non-self', and their accounts afford experiential insights into non-self by allowing listeners to be placed in the story and be

marked by its impression. Their narratives, Cook argues, are both communicative and constitutive, their meanings dialogic and emergent in practice, and their tropes intrinsic to the way in which those who employ them perceive and organise their experience within the world: “cultural schema” intersect with transformative processes of person-making’. As such, she argues that the internalisation of certain narratives of achievement is not just a cognitive process but also an ethical one.

A complementary perspective on the issue of achievement narratives is offered by Olga Solomon, whose chapter explores how Southern Californian families in which a child has been diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) engage with the life histories of high-achieving autistic individuals. As Solomon explains, the hegemonic notions of work, occupation and market value that circulate in American society have historically led to pessimistic prospects for autistic children. Given such a context, Solomon argues that the writings of high-functioning adults with ASD, as well as their music, artworks and cinematic accounts of their lives, have changed the existential landscape of possibilities for children diagnosed with autism and their families by suggesting that achievement can occur despite, or perhaps even because of, their autism. Such narratives engender affordances – opportunities for action provided by a particular object in the environment – in which achievement is a possible outcome, and Solomon thus traces how children and their families work to make the narratives relevant to their circumstances and thereby craft a particular kind of achieving self going into the future.

A similar principle underpinned the use of imagery (both verbal and visual) of achievement within the U.S. civil rights movement. Campaigners hoped to use images of Black achievers and heroes to instil racial pride and self-esteem amongst African Americans whilst also overturning negative stereotypes held by Whites (Hughes 1941; Berger 2010).<sup>11</sup> The affordances described by Solomon are more complex because of the imputation that achievement may not just be despite, but also because of autism. Of course, such reasoning constitutes exactly the kind of generic statement about who achieves and who doesn’t achieve that have been argued by developmental psychologists to have counterproductive and demotivating effects for both achievers and their peers (Heyman 2008; Cimpian 2010). What Solomon’s material suggests, however, is that even if such narratives propagate problematic understandings of the self as having fixed traits, these problems are outweighed by their capacity to redefine the implications of autism (often already understood as a fixed trait of the self), thereby creating spaces for hope, motivation and empowerment for autistic children and their families. The psychological and social effects of generic achievement talk might thus be much more positive for people occupying marginal subject positions.

## Achievement and Social Knowledge

If the chapters by Long, Cook and Solomon place their focus on how the semantic knowledge that unfolds in the wake of achievement shapes the subject's imaginative engagement with the self, the final four chapters in the volume place an emphasis on how the achieving subject imaginatively engages with others, and is in turn imaginatively engaged with by them. This field of outcomes, which we bracket under the term 'social knowledge', is very diverse: it can include affect and narrative, as well as deliberate and conscious projects of ethical reasoning, but it often unfolds simply through the performance and practice of everyday interactions. These might not only lead to new ways in which relations with others are imagined or fantasised; events can occur in such a way that structural opportunities to participate in social worlds are opened up or closed down. When this happens, the way in which the social life of achievement rolls forward through time can become something over which the ethically imaginative subject has limited if any control. One thinks, for example, of the British singer Susan Boyle, who experienced a nervous breakdown after – and seemingly as a consequence of – her audition on the television show *Britain's Got Talent* catapulted her unexpectedly into the public eye: her audition received over 186 million views on YouTube in just nineteen days, and her personality and life story was intimately probed by national and international media (Enli 2009: 487–89). Conversely, for all that the South Korean workers studied by Joseph Park (2011) strove to boost their job prospects by improving the quality of their English language, they found that every time they had reached a certain standard, the expectations of the job market became correspondingly higher and the monetary recognition of their achievements (for which they had so desperately hoped) was endlessly deferred. Such processes can, as these examples show, have tremendous implications for subjects' imaginative engagement with the self and others, and with the notion of achievement itself.

Sarah Green's account of the men who developed the private equity sector in the U.K. shows how central the issue of continuing participation in a particular social world can be, even in a context that is often portrayed as fundamentally self-interested. Private equity has led to many of its practitioners becoming incredibly wealthy, but also being pilloried in the mass media as morally suspect. However, neither of these factors plays a significant role in explaining why practitioners continue or cease to remain involved in private equity; nor is money-making taken as a primary index of one's achievement. Instead, Green argues that the field of private equity is construed as a fun but high-risk game that carries distinct pleasures and has its own moral valence, participation in which is predicated upon skill and integrity in the management of both numbers and social relations. Given this, practitioners were not only impervious to the moral critique of their financial activities; they were also unfazed by the prospect of massive drops in their net worth. Having already made amounts of money that they described as being 'beyond any sane logic', practitioners would not

consider a loss to be painful on its own terms: what the money represented was not an achievement in itself, but rather an index of the skill that one had in playing the game – a skill that, given the brutal firing rates, needed to be demonstrated repeatedly if one wished to keep playing it. It was this skill, Green emphasises, that was the achievement. Of course, being a highly skilled and effective economic actor is itself something that is heavily incentivised within the cultural logic of neoliberalism. What stands out when reading Green's account, however, is how little her interviewees described the pleasures of this achievement in terms of fulfilling broader social norms, and instead the importance that they placed on sustaining their attachments to the world of private equity that they had created: to the beauty of the calculations, and to the intricacies of managing the social relationships. Achievement was not important because it allowed them to become a particular kind of person so much as because it allowed them to inhere – psychologically and structurally – within a distinctive, highly exclusive and incredibly pleasurable social world.

The question of full participation in a desired and fantasised social world is also a central concern for the Vietnamese citizens discussed by Susan Bayly in her study of how Vietnam's marketisation has transformed experiences of and attitudes towards achievement since high-socialist times. There have been continuities: achieving is still widely felt to be seen as something that is done for the collectivities of family, community and nation to which one belongs, rather than personal gain, and establishing the strong position of Vietnam within a world of global others has long been a crucial ethical and political problem. Yet the parameters of how this could be done are transforming, giving rise to emergent new notions of achievement. No longer does achievement involve Vietnamese citizens being sent to other socialist countries in order to acquire or share expertise. Patriotic achievement in Vietnam now involves constituting oneself as a high-quality human resource, who is able to propel the nation up global human development rankings, and who does so whilst maintaining his or her distinctive Vietnamese-ness.

Bayly reveals that, although these recent problematisations of achievement have engendered new dilemmas for contemporary Vietnamese – from anxieties over stature to the fear that they are creating an epidemic of 'achievement disease' – historic formulations of what it is to be an achiever continue to inform present-day ideas about what it is to live an ethical and virtuous life. Moreover, far from simply defaulting to the dominant ideas of human resource quality associated with globalisation and neoliberalism, the current interest in 'human resources' is leading to creative new possibilities. Not least amongst these is the emergence of credentialised psychics as a new (albeit controversial) category of achiever. This serves to recast the matrix of relations between Vietnamese and global others because the psychic arts are construed as a form of human capital that is uniquely advanced in Vietnam, to a degree and of which richer and more powerful nations could only dream. As such, Bayly shows how the social life of achievement rolls forward over time in an ongoing process of cultural invention, giving rise to novel

and powerful social imaginaries of how achievers might know and be known by others, which operate on domestic, national and global scales.

Whether or not one actually is known by others in the way that one hopes, however, is a crucial determinant of the way in which achievement affects persons and collectivities, as the final two chapters in this volume reveal. Peter Demerath's chapter focuses on a high-achieving school in 'Wilton', in the American Midwest, where pressure to achieve is inculcated as a means of helping pupils to safeguard their class status in an uncertain future. Demerath's analysis thus takes the school itself as a dynamic relational matrix, showing how the social life of achievement rolls forward in ways that teach an 'unwritten curriculum' for being an employable worker-citizen: competitive, confident, highly directed, able to advocate for oneself (for example in negotiating grades) and prepared to cheat or lie when necessary. Key elements of this process include what Demerath calls 'hypercredentialing' – a veritable proliferation of achievements, designed to give pupils the confidence (and the CV) required to achieve life-long success – and intensive parental involvement in their children's work. However, as Demerath, argues, achievements in Wilton are fetishised as individual, despite having largely been generated systemically, ideologically and relationally: it is the presence of this fetish that allows pupils to claim achievements as their own, and thereby derive from them the pleasure, self-belief and confidence required for an imaginative engagement with the world that will prove effective in neoliberal times.

Demerath's analysis thereby implicitly highlights the vulnerabilities that can be associated with coming to know oneself as an achiever – for what would happen if the fetish slipped? It is such vulnerability, and the potential it opens up for structural and symbolic violence, that lies at the heart of Signithia Fordham's study of a high school in the upstate New York city of 'Rodman' in which she explores the dilemmas presented by achievement for two Black girls, as well as for women (of colour) more generally, in a world where achievement of various kinds is frequently presented as both desirable and illegitimate, and the narration of others' achievement can thus become an immensely powerful weapon of aggression, competition and bullying.

Keyshia, one of Fordham's two focal students, is extremely talented academically, yet she seeks to downplay this – sitting her college admission exams out of state and disclosing her results only to selected friends, swearing them to secrecy. This, Fordham explains, is the result of Keyshia's painful experiences when studying in Maryland, where her results led her to be shunned by her Black peers for 'acting White', but also be envied and rejected by her White peers, who cruelly attributed her success to affirmative action policies. This led to Keyshia harbouring enormous insecurities that she is 'not Black enough', prompting her to latch onto other Black girls at her new school as a means of support. Fordham thus shows how achievement – because of its capacity to be narrated to and known about by others – can render the achiever vulnerable within her matrix of relations, and prompt new, defensive, strategies

of sociality. The issue is exacerbated in Keyshia's case by the question of gender. While her parents want Keyshia to be academically successful, her own standard of achievement conforms to the dominant templates of femininity that circulate in her school: she wants to marry and have children. Where such norms prevail, as Fordham argues with reference to the U.S. more widely, female success in school or the workplace can actually be experienced as a form of loss.

Secondly, Fordham suggests that patriarchal contexts of this kind structurally induce women to 'compete to lose' – a concept she illustrates by analysing a fight between Nadine, Keyshia's former best friend, and Kristen, a White cheerleader at the school. When Kristen calls Nadine a 'nigger bitch', Nadine hits back. She wins the fight – but by crying and presenting herself as a victim, Kristen is able to ensure that Nadine is excluded from school shortly before her final exams. Within this competitive and highly gendered school environment, Kristen is able to manipulate her status as the fight's 'loser' in order to shape the social life of achievement that Nadine must go on to endure. Fordham's chapter thus highlights that achievement frequently has an inherent bifocality – because what looks like 'winning' from one perspective can be contested as 'losing' from another – and that the study of this bifocality must be integral to any study of the social life of achievement. This partly involves attending to the fact that such bifocality can be and is manipulated deliberately and inadvertently, in ways that assure the dominance of some, whilst trapping other seeming 'achievers' in a subjectivity of 'social defeat' (Luhmann 2006). It also demands sustained attention to the ways in which the appropriateness of various forms of achievement varies according to such categories as sexuality, gender, class, nationality and race.

## Conclusion

While Jan Malloch (2009) promised her readers that 'no matter what you achieve in life ... you will feel such a wonderful sense of achievement', and Tennessee Williams ([1945] 2009: 36) suggested that if you 'ask anyone who has experienced the kind of success I am talking about – What good is it? ... [T]he word he will finally groan is unprintable in genteel publications', the consequences of achieving are by no means as straightforward or as predictable as either of these writers would have us believe. Nor can such differential outcomes as they experienced be readily predicted. However, they can be understood, and it is in this regard that the notion of the social life of achievement that we have developed in this volume offers a distinctive contribution to the social sciences.

Dominant anthropological and psychological approaches to achievement, which primarily conceptualise achievement practices in relation to 'culture', cognition or regimes of governmentality, struggle to provide a framework which can account for the striking differences in how particular subjects are affected by achievement in particular situations. This, we have argued, is because their

approach operates on too broad and generalising a scale, failing to pay sufficient attention to the specific dynamic relational matrices in which human subjects exist, or to the fantasmatic character of intersubjectivity. By contrast, studying the entire social life of achievement allows us to develop sharper and more insightful ways as to how subjects imaginatively engage with the world both before and after achievement occurs.

Secondly, as our contributors demonstrate, the forms of affective, semantic and social knowledge that are generated through achievement events pay a critical role in re-problematising achievement for subjects, leading to diverse new forms of understanding of the self and its relations with others, new forms of attachment to the world, new endeavours of ethical imagination, and, as such, practices of cultural invention ranging from the benign and pleasurable to the masochistic or destructive. The way in which the social life of achievement rolls forward is thus contingent on the event of achievement itself. On the one hand, this means that any overarching theory seeking to predict how the social life of achievement will roll forward in advance of it occurring is doomed to be frustrated by the complexity of events as they actually unfold. On the other, though, a more careful assessment of factors and circumstances may offer some capacity for predicting how specific individuals are likely to be affected by achieving; and at the very least may help to ward off some of the most destructive forms of damage that can be wreaked in achievement's name. But exploring the potential applications of the framework we have developed is a task that lies beyond the present volume. For now, we simply hope that the diverse analyses proffered by our contributors will provide a stimulating conceptual toolkit for our readers – both as they investigate 'achievement' within their research, and as they grapple with it as an ethical and political problem in their professional and personal lives.

### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Andrei Cimpian, Dawson Price and Olivia Steinberg for invaluable input on the latest research in developmental psychology. Nicholas Long's work on this introduction was generously supported by a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship, a Junior Research Fellowship at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, and funding from the ESRC (grant number RES-000-22-4632).

### **Notes**

1. See, e.g., a report in the *Daily Mail*: <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2026001/self-help-books-ruin-life-they-promise-sell-millions.html>> (accessed 13 February 2013).
2. Indeed, intense as current interest in achievement and success can be, these very terms are in fact a relatively recent introduction to the popular consciousness: literary critic George Parsons saw the European preoccupation with 'success' as having its origins in the

nineteenth century, writing in 1888 that 'To succeed! – this word, *unknown a century since*, is to-day the sovereign ruler of all lives' (Parsons 1888: xv, our emphasis). Moreover, several observers have commented on the difficulty of translating the term (and concept of) 'achievement', even into such languages as French, a fact which suggests that the term's resonance, although increasingly widespread, is not yet universal (Hofstede 1980: 21; Clement 1988).

3. Blythe's play *Where Have I Been All My Life?* (dir. T. Heskins) premiered at the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme, 7–28 April 2012.
4. Quoted from the website of Walsall College: <<http://www.walsallcollege.ac.uk/mmlib/includes/sendfile.php?id=3912>> (accessed 5 June 2012).
5. Of course, there were many authors writing during the twentieth century who were far from blind to the ambivalent outcomes of 'achievement'. Anthropologists writing on witchcraft showed how excessive success could easily lead to suspicion and ostracism (Kuper 1983: 78), while the works of such writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Tennessee Williams did much to highlight the empty promises of 'success' and the American Dream. Despite this, however, the ambivalent outcomes of achievement rarely became an explicit point of reflection or investigation within the social science disciplines more broadly.
6. See also the critiques of McClelland developed by De Vos (1973), Graves (1974) and Owens and Nandy (1978).
7. This was an impact that had been anticipated by McClelland himself, who had argued that his work was 'of more than academic interest because so many countries consciously want to develop rapidly at the present time. They might ... be willing to grant that ... *n* Achievement is somehow needed for economic growth, but then they would naturally want to know how to produce more of it. A whole new perspective is opened up – the possibility of social planning in terms of its psychological effects' (McClelland 1961: 336–37).
8. Of course, the precise implications of this language is contingent on how it intersects with other ethical and political concerns in any given context. Moreover, as Foucault underscores, social, economic and political influences are necessary but not sufficient conditions for something to stand out as a problem: they 'instigate' the process, but the ultimate form of the problematisation is original, specific and determined by individuals' own processes of thought (Foucault 2000: 118).
9. Ballerina Nina, the protagonist of this film, is presented as a character so desperate to achieve her dream of being cast in the lead role in Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake* that she subjects herself not only to a punishing physical and dietary regime, she slowly descends into madness, a process which culminates in a brilliant but suicidal performance on stage. In the closing scene, as her co-stars rush to her dying body, we hear her final words: 'It was perfect'. Unsubtle as the film's narrative might be, it finds such chilling parallels in this volume as Peter Demerath's portrait of an American schoolgirl so driven to achieve that she disrupts her own hormonal balance, or the Vietnamese discourses of 'achievement disease' traced by Susan Bayly.
10. Higgins's later work (e.g., Higgins 2011) places more emphasis on the apprehension of the social world; but the self is still fundamentally presented as a perceiving and interpreting monad rather than as physically present within, or dynamically co-productive of, that world.
11. In addition to Berger (2010), see also the 2012 exhibition *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (curator M. Berger). The exhibition was organised by the CADVC, University of Maryland, in partnership with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, and viewed at the National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, TN, 28 March 2012.

## References

- Appadurai, A. 1986. Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value. In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (ed.) A. Appadurai, 3–63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aronofsky, D. (dir.). 2010. *Black Swan*. Fox Searchlight Pictures.
- Badiou, A. 2006. *Logiques des mondes: l'être et l'événement*, vol. 2. Paris: Seuil.
- Berger, M. 2010. *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Cimpian, A. 2010. The Impact of Generic Language About Ability on Children's Achievement Motivation. *Developmental Psychology* 46, no. 5: 1333–1340.
- Cimpian, A., H.-M.C. Arce, E.M. Markman and C.S. Dweck. 2007. Subtle Linguistic Cues Affect Children's Motivation. *Psychological Science* 18, no. 4: 314–316.
- Clance, P.R., and S.A. Imes. 1978. The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* 15, no. 3: 241–247.
- Clement, R. W. 1988. Management Development in the 1980s: A Field in Transition. *Journal of Management Development* 7, no. 1: 45–55.
- Clough, P.T. 2008. The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine and Bodies. *Theory, Culture and Society* 25, no. 1: 1–22.
- Corpus, J.H., and M.R. Lepper. 2007. The Effects of Person Versus Performance Praise on Children's Motivation: Gender and Age as Moderating Factors. *Educational Psychology* 27, no. 4: 487–508.
- D'Andrade, R.G. 1992. Schemas and Motivation. In *Human Motives and Cultural Models*, (eds) R.G. D'Andrade and C. Strauss, 23–44. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, E. 2011. *The Burdens of Aspiration: Schools, Youth, and Success in the Divided Worlds of Silicon Valley*. New York: NYU Press.
- De Rond, M. 2009. *The Last Amateurs: To Hell and Back with the Cambridge Boat Race Crew*. London: Icon.
- De Vos, G.A. 1973. *Socialization for Achievement: Essays on the Cultural Psychology of the Japanese*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Demerath, P. 2009. *Producing Success: The Culture of Personal Advancement in an American High School*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dollard, J. 1941. Review of *Explorations in Personality*. *American Anthropologist* 43, no. 1: 118–120.
- Dweck, C.S. 1999. *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality and Development*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press.
- Enli, G.S. 2009. Mass Communication Tapping into Participatory Culture: Exploring *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Britain's Got Talent*. *European Journal of Communication* 24, no. 4: 481–493.
- Ford, D.Y., and A. Thomas. 1997. *Underachievement among Gifted Minority Students: Problems and Promises*. Reston: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education.
- Fordham, S. 1996. *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity and Success at Capital High*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. 2000. Polemics, Politics and Problematizations. In *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol 1: *Ethics* (ed.) P. Rabinow, 111–119. London: Penguin.
- Graves, T.D. 1974. Urban Indian Personality and the 'Culture of Poverty'. *American Ethnologist* 1, no. 1: 65–86.

- Harkins, J. 1990. Shame and Shyness in the Aboriginal Classroom: A Case For 'Practical Semantics'. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 10, no. 2: 293–306.
- Hemmings, C. 2005. Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn. *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5: 548–567.
- Heyman, G.D. 2008. Talking About Success: Implications for Achievement Motivation. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 29, no. 5: 361–370.
- Higgins, E.T. 1997. Beyond Pleasure and Pain. *American Psychologist* 52, no. 12: 1280–1300.
- 2011. *Beyond Pleasure and Pain: How Motivation Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hofstede, G. H. 2001. *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations* (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Hughes, L. 1941. The Need for Heroes. *The Crisis* 48, no. 6: 184–206.
- Hultberg, P. 1985. Success, Retreat, Panic: Over-Stimulation and Depressive Defence. *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 30, no. 1: 73–93.
- Humphrey, C. 2008. Reassembling Individual Subjects: Events and Decisions in Troubled Times. *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 4: 357–380.
- Izard, C.E., G.M. Wehmer, W. Livsey and J.R. Jennings. 1966. Affect, Awareness, and Performance. In *Affect, Cognition, and Personality: Empirical Studies* (eds) S.S. Tomkins and C.E. Izard, 2–41. London: Tavistock.
- Kamins, M.L., and C.S. Dweck. 1999. Person Versus Process Praise and Criticism: Implications for Contingent Self-Worth and Coping. *Developmental Psychology* 35, no. 3: 835–847.
- Kruger, M.S. 1933. Pleasure and Pain and the Emotions. *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 13, no. 1: 51–62.
- Krugman, P. 1994. Competitiveness: A Dangerous Obsession. *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2: 28–44.
- Kuper, A. 1983. *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School* (rev. edn). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- LeVine, R.A. 1968. *Dreams and Deeds: Achievement Motivation in Nigeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Long, N.J. 2007. How to Win a Beauty Contest in Tanjung Pinang. *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 41, no. 1: 91–117.
- 2012. Utopian Sociality. Online. *Cambridge Anthropology* 30, no. 1: 80–94.
- forthcoming. Sociality, in Anthropology. In *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2nd edn), (ed.) J.D. Wright. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Long, N.J., and H.L. Moore. 2013. Introduction: Sociality's New Directions. In *Sociality: New Directions* (eds) N.J. Long and H.L. Moore, 1–24. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Luhrmann, T. 2006. Subjectivity. *Anthropological Theory* 6, no. 3: 345–361.
- Maehr, M.L. 2008. Culture and Achievement Motivation. *International Journal of Psychology* 43, no. 5: 917–918.
- Malloch, J. 2009. Achievement and the 7 Benefits of the Feel Good Factor. <[http://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/achievement\\_and\\_7\\_benefits\\_feel\\_good\\_factor.html](http://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/achievement_and_7_benefits_feel_good_factor.html)> (accessed 5 May 2012).
- McClelland, D.C. 1961. *The Achieving Society*. Princeton: van Nostrand.
- McClelland, D.C., J.W. Atkinson, R.A. Clark and E.L. Lowell. 1953. *The Achievement Motive*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Moore, H.L. 2011. *Still Life: Hopes, Desires and Satisfactions*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- 2012. Avatars and Robots: The Imaginary Present and the Socialities of the Inorganic. *Cambridge Anthropology* 30, no. 1: 48–63.

- Mueller, C.M., and C.S. Dweck. 1998. Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, no. 1: 33–52.
- Murray, H.A. [1938] 2008. *Explorations in Personality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nandy, A. 1987. *Tradition, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Ogbu, J.U. 1987. Variability in Minority School Performance: A Problem in Search of an Explanation. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18, no. 4: 312–334.
- Owens, R.L., and A. Nandy. 1978. *The New Vaisyas: Entrepreneurial Opportunity and Response in an Indian City*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Park, J.S.-Y. 2011. The Promise of English: Linguistic Capital and the Neoliberal Worker in the South Korean Job Market. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 14, no. 4: 443–455.
- Parsons, G. F. 1888. Introduction. In *The Magic Skin*, H. de Balzac, i-xliii. London: Routledge.
- Paul, R.A. 1990. What Does Anybody Want? Desire, Purpose, and the Acting Subject in the Study of Culture. *Cultural Anthropology* 5, no. 4: 431–451.
- Perivoliotis, D., and C. Cather. 2009. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy of Negative Symptoms. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 65, no. 8: 815–830.
- Phoenix, A. 1998. Dealing with Difference: The Recursive and the New. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 5: 859–880.
- Reboussin, R., and J.W. Goldstein. 1966. Achievement Motivation in Navaho and White Students. *American Anthropologist* 68, no. 3: 740–745.
- Rostow, W.W. 1960. *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spurlock, J. 1985. Survival Guilt and the Afro-American of Achievement. *Journal of the National Medical Association* 77, no. 1: 29–32.
- Strauss, C. 1992a. Models and Motives. In *Human Motives and Cultural Models* (eds) R.G. D'Andrade and C. Strauss, 1–20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1992b. What Makes Tony Run? Schemas as Motives Reconsidered. In *Human Motives and Cultural Models* (eds) R.G. D'Andrade and C. Strauss, 197–224. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Suárez-Orozco, C., and M. Suárez-Orozco. 1995. *Transformations: Immigration, Family Life, and Achievement Motivation Amongst Latino Adolescents*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Sweeney, J. 2003. Is That It? Questioning Economic Success. *Ethical Perspectives* 10, no. 2: 138–150.
- Venn, C. 2010. Individuation, Relationality, Affect: Rethinking the Human in Relation to the Living. *Body and Society* 16, no. 1: 129–161.
- Weiner, B. 1990. History of Motivational Research in Education. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 82, no. 4: 616–622.
- Williams, T. [1945] 2009. The Catastrophe of Success. In *Tennessee Williams' New Selected Essays: Where I Live* (ed.) J.S. Bak, 32–36. New York: New Directions.
- Wilson, P. 1991. Trauma of Sioux Indian High School Students. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 22, no. 4: 367–383.
- Zentall, S.R., and B.J. Morris. 2010. 'Good Job, You're So Smart': The Effects of Inconsistency of Praise Type on Young Children's Motivation. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 107, no. 2: 155–163.