



## Negotiating a transnational career around borders: Women's stories in boundaryless academia

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### ABSTRACT

The study aimed to give voice to two women sport scientists' life stories to centralize the challenges and ways of coping their career journeys entailed, and enlighten our understanding of the lived experience and meaning of academic migrating. They shared transnational career stories through interviews and ongoing conversations which we re-story in a creative non-fiction story where we blended the two. Our data collection, analysis and representation were informed by theoretical, methodological and interpretive bricolage. As the creative non-fiction story shows, the academic entrepreneur ideal was somewhat disrupted in the women's lives, as migration experiences, aside from thrills, also involved rough and complex negotiations and challenges. However, the experiences and lessons learned from migration experiences informed subsequent decisions and relocations while work and home became a state of mind and a sense of comfort for the two women who relentlessly swapped priorities between home and work. We identified three strategies – negotiating, redirecting, and accepting – that the women applied to their home and work life while trying to stay true to themselves and their values. The literature on transnationalism and academics as mobilised professionals helped us bring to light 'silenced' elements of the academic narrative as forms of women's professional development in sport sciences that are not part of 'official' narratives of career-building were uncovered.

### 1. The re-story of two stories

*We were born in different countries, few years apart from each other and grew up with our families through different national transformations and societal ideals. We are women, women who prospered in academia and particularly in the world of sports sciences; we built solid CVs, made it to professorship and to leading research groups and organizations. Through the years, we nurtured many young minds, developing scholars and practitioners; we touched on the lives of students, colleagues, athletes, coaches, parents, of all for whom we cared. To get where we are today, we crossed many borders, literally and metaphorically. The journey has been long and took us places; different countries and national cultures, different departments and organizational cultures, different sports and sporting cultures. Throughout the journey, we negotiated a lot. Negotiating has been a means for survival, a way to develop as persons and professionals and a way to preserve our fundamental values. Negotiating became our agency for living life so we would keep growing and bettering; our process for approaching the challenges, obstacles,*

*limitations and borders we met in our paths. We negotiated with family, with friends, with significant others, with colleagues, with leaders, but most often and above all, we negotiated with ourselves.*

*Where and how all started? It started with us, with who we are and what we thought of as meaningful in life. It started with the needs of ours we wanted to satisfy, like giving back to the world of sports that we enjoyed immensely when growing up. While working hard to satisfy our needs, from most basic to higher ones, we met with another essential need of ours, the need for parity. When or how this need for parity was shaped, we are unsure of but can speculate. When growing up the second feminist wave had touched societies worldwide, and to an unknown to us extent it also touched our mothers and fathers who raised us aspiring (and expecting) that we will stand on our own feet, claim what could be ours, excel at small and big things. In other words, we were groomed to be autonomous and to make a difference. Most likely it was also shaped in and through sport as we were initiated in it rather young and participated for long; as athletes and then coaches we lived, witnessed, and learned to notice the gender disparity present in the world of sports. Last*

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*but not least, our need for parity was shaped by the national and transnational journey we undertook, where among other things we learned that our idealist aspirations were challenging for the men-dominated and in general conformist worlds of sports and academia that we fell in love with and chose to live in, and that being a migrant as thrilling as it is also hides a number of perplexing experiences.*

## 2. Research question and methodological approach

What you read in italics is the beginning of a creative non-fiction story centred on the stories of two women. This creative analytic practice uses fiction techniques to represent non-fiction (Caulley, 2008) while protecting the anonymity of participants. Importantly, the creative component does not imply that the story is simply ‘made up’ by us. Instead, while using literary techniques, creative non-fiction writers are deeply committed to writing honestly and accurately about the phenomenon they are seeking to understand. This form of representation falls within a storyteller (rather than a story analyst) approach (Frank, 2000), where the focus is not on abstract theorising but on “emotionally witnessing an embodied life” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 282). This approach was best suited to seek answers for our research question that asks, what does a life of professional migrations look and feel like for women sport scientists? Our objective was to delve into the transnational mobility experiences of women academics and bring to the fore challenges and ways of coping in their career journeys which are typically ‘closeted’ and/or ‘swept under the rug’. As Frank (2000) noted:

People I call storytellers tell stories to remind those who share their form of life what it is they share; people’s sense of being together is enriched within the storytelling relation. Storytellers also offer those who do not share their form of life a glimpse of what it means to live informed by such values, meanings, relationships, and commitments (p. 361).

The idea for writing this paper was conceptualized a few years ago upon realizing that some of us women were sharing parallel professional lives while living and working in different countries and having different personal realities. Transnational mobility has become integral to academic career development and in general is portrayed as an enriching experience (Plöger & Kubiak, 2019), yet for women academics, transnational mobility was found to reproduce gender inequalities as they often encounter more personal and professional costs associated with the mobility in comparison to men academics (Jöns, 2011; Leemann, 2010). While we managed to move forward on our bifurcated paths, we feel compelled to share our discomfort with the hegemonic/dominant representation of a successful academic career by inserting ourselves and our ‘messy’ women’s lives in the picture of academic migration to become agents of change. And so, we embarked on a project we titled “Transnational Careers” aspiring to bring the voices of women sport scientists’ migration experiences to the forefront, which unlike other experiences of women are not represented in the mainstream textbook chapters and journal articles we use for preparing young sport scientists. In general, traditional sports science resources are heavily informed by a male-centred norm while women’s experiences as research participants, teachers, researchers, or practitioners are ‘othered’ or marginalised as an add-on in designated books, chapters, and special issues (e.g., see Carter, 2019; Costello et al., 2014; Gill, 2001; Krane, 1994).

In seeking answers to our research question, we acknowledge multiple approaches to qualitative research. As we aspired to learn from women’s stories of their experiences, feelings, and truths and the meaning they made with these for their transnational careers, it was the life story (Etherington, 2009) and empirical phenomenology (Allen-Collinson, 2017; Willig, 2007) research approaches that were of relevance. Life story research focuses on stories about particular aspects of people’s lived experience while one’s whole life is considered in the background (Etherington, 2009). According to Etherington (2009), the

life story research approach draws on “‘narrative knowledge’ (Bruner, 1986), which is created and co-constructed through the stories people tell about their lived experiences, and the meanings they give to those experiences over time that might change and develop as their stories unfold” (p. 225). Empirical phenomenology seeks to understand and interpret the meanings of experiences and feelings of the participants while going beyond the mere description of a phenomenon experienced by the participants (Allen-Collinson, 2017; Willig, 2007). As women researchers with transnational mobility experiences of our own, we lived and worked in the same natural setting and interacted with the participants and their (our) world while we had also walked in the shoes of a migrant academic. Hence, we were insiders with profound levels of understanding of the participants’ embodied experiences, and our research would not be a second-hand empirical phenomenological study but an autophenomenographic one (Allen-Collinson, 2017). Autophenomenography employs the researchers’ “insider experiential knowledge” to go beyond “a feel for what it is like to be in the shoes of the participants” (Allen-Collinson, 2017, p. 19). The aim is to “provide highly textured, in-depth descriptions that locate the structures of individual experience” (p. 20) within the wider spectrum of lived experience (Allen-Collinson, 2017), which for us was the experience of being a woman sport scientist within the broader structures of the transnational mobility human experience.

Lastly, as women we possessed an intimate perspective privileging us on how we could recognize and embrace other women’s experiences; we felt well equipped to understand worlds like family, sport sciences, migration through these women’s eyes and shoes, and qualified for undertaking a feminist research approach (Cooky, 2017; Krane, 1994). Feminist research places gender at the centre of data collection and analysis, employing heightened critical awareness of the impact of gender on women’s lived experiences (Cooky, 2017; Krane, 1994). However, based on our insider perspective, we knew that gender and gender-based experiences were not enough for unpacking the stories we were about to dive into. According to the theory of intersectionality, different aspects of a person’s social and political identities work together to produce different forms of discrimination and privilege (Cooky, 2017). Intersectionality acknowledges how different aspects of a person’s identity do not stand-alone but inform each other to produce a complex convergence of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). We entered this study understanding that among different aspects of our participants, all of which we didn’t know yet, gender, race, national origin, abilities, economic status, immigration status, marital status, and career stage could operate together, aggravate each other and impact their access to opportunity.

Our decisions for the methods we employed were made as most suitable for answering the research question while staying true to our ontological and epistemological stances. As persons and researchers, we accept that knowledge is interpreted and realities are understood (interpretivist paradigm), that all truths are relative to ongoing interactions and negotiations we perform day after day (epistemic relativism), and that all knowledge and truths are gendered (feminist) (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Considering how several research approaches mentioned above could help us bring this study into realization, the bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Kincheloe, 2005; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2012) gave us the best way forward. According to Steinberg and Kincheloe (2012), the bricolage is a critical eclectic view of research “which involves taking research strategies from a variety of disciplines and traditions as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation” (p. 1494) and where the bricoleur, as a “critical eclectic researcher is able to negotiate a panoply of data-gathering techniques and a plethora of interpretive theoretical constructs” (p. 1495).

In particular, three of the bricolage dimensions supported our work, the theoretical, methodological, and interpretive bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe, 2005). The theoretical bricolage employs broad knowledge of social theoretical positions to locate and determine the purpose, meaning and uses of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000;

Kincheloe, 2005). In this study, Sage's (1992) critical social thought applied to sport that is asking us to think and act critically; Ryba and Wright's (2005; 2010) cultural praxis heuristic asking us to step away from the singular culture of sport and consider issues of marginalization, representation, and social justice through cultural research lens; and the theory of intersectionality, asking us to consider everything and anything that can marginalise people, like gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. (Crenshaw, 1989) guided us in doing research that matters. The methodological bricolage employs various data-gathering strategies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe, 2005); here, we started with life-story interviews and continued adding data with online and face-to-face conversations until we could understand the participants and be in place to interpret and share their experiences. Lastly, with the interpretive bricolage we employed multiple perspectives related to the intersecting axes of our participants' personal history, race, socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, geographical place, and other dynamics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe, 2005). As bricoleurs we employed all means necessary to make it through the diverse meanings embedded here; meanings that had to do with the participants being women, partners, mothers, colleagues, employees within the world of sports science and the area of transnational mobility. Since we believe in truths being relative, knowledge being interpretive, and all being gendered, Kincheloe's (2005) position that "the relationship between individuals and their contexts is a central dynamic to be investigated" (p. 334) made any individual, social, or cultural interplay a key concern in our work as we attempted to understand "the ways in which phenomena [like women's transnational careers] are interconnected and relational, and knowledge about them socially constructed" (Yardley, 2019, p. 6).

The present paper may seem a tad unorthodox, at least in the way it is written. From one end, "we are exploring [here] forms of communication that we do not normally use to represent what we have learned ..." (Eisner, 1997, p. 5). Four decades ago, Eisner (1981) called for more artistic approaches to qualitative research, and the writing of the story we tell was all about making art for us. Also in sport studies, Sparkes (1992) called for alternative research, and several authors have more recently used creative forms of representation (e.g., Douglas, 2009; Mills, 2015; Smith, 2013). As the story we re-story unfolds, so does the methodology we employed and the literature that helped locate the structures of these stories. From another end, like the women protagonists in our story, we are negotiating here as researchers; we negotiate through a creative way of writing for an opportunity to share what we learned in a way that flows freely and does not conform with the traditional structure (introduction, methodology, results, discussion). And, in the next section, our story continues.

### 3. On privilege

*We are regarded as privileged white women but when we look at our life stories, we are unsure of where this privilege lays and what privilege(s) we have enjoyed in the worlds of sports, sport sciences or academia in general. We came to accept that privilege resembles the concept of talent in sport; its definition is relative to time and place along with who's looking at us. We pursued bachelor studies in sport sciences and physical education and eventually went on to doctoral studies. Doing a PhD was a decision we made for ourselves, an endeavour we took on that differentiated us from what family thought was best for us. It was one of the first negotiations we assumed, to let go of family having a saying over our choices and future and mould our paths. Circumstances, like not being able to get a job right out of bachelor studies, did help this negotiation go our way without much fighting. In looking back, we did not realize that this was a negotiation back then, we did much later when we had to undertake more negotiations, much harder ones. It took us some time to realize what negotiating signified for our beings and doings, for our progress, for our careers, for our survival, for our lives as women, as mothers, as wives, as caring and determined individuals. For everything we were at any given time, and we are today, there has been a negotiation behind*

*it. Maybe this is what makes us privileged, the freedom to seize any opportunity to negotiate silently and aloud, inter- and intra-personally. Our privilege is about the opportunities we found or created for developing ourselves, building our careers, touching and feeling life, falling and rising again and again.*

### 4. Participants and representation

The women we represent in the current study are strong and sensitive on the outside and the inside, they are committed to serving their science, to making a difference and to giving back through their work. They are high achievers and caring individuals and never felt these as contradictory. They are career-oriented with a strong work ethic. They are researchers and practitioners, while in the past both trained and competed as athletes, and today they are also mothers. They are white, heterosexual, middle-aged women of Christian backgrounds. They have worked well with women and men leaders, colleagues, students, athletes, coaches, and officials but also have had their share of rough and not very successful collaborations. They are enthusiastic, hopeful but not careless risk-takers. They are comfortable with rethinking their ways of being and doing, and they are fast to see the good in troublesome situations. They are very well acquainted with fresh starts, cultural and operational adaptation processes and adjustment periods. They are used to different cultures and different languages. Last but not least, they have two fundamental values transcending both work and life, honesty and fairness, which are expressed and served through their frank, forthright approach. Of course, this direct approach of theirs proved to be not suitable for all occasions and people they met in their journeys; at times they won battles and lost wars because of it, yet to them this is the way to be at peace with themselves, knowing they are honest and their view of righteousness is served.

We used the two women's life stories to write one coherent story that is non-fiction and where characters, incidents, and places creatively blend in and cannot be taken apart for protecting the anonymity of the interviewees and third parties. The story we tell has high and low points, successes and disappointments; has what most lives have, plenty of heavens and hells. What intrigued us and made this project worthwhile to pursue was these women's *feeling of not fitting in*, in spite of the achievements and experience they put under their belts. What we hope for by sharing these stories is to step away from singularity (Ryba & Wright, 2005) and approach multiplicity within academia and sport science departments once diversity and non-conformity are accepted as developmental challenges instead of threats to tradition(s), conformity, sameness. Smith and Sparkes (2009) suggested that "the more stories we have access to, the more potential opportunities and flexibility we may have to live in different and more meaningful ways" (p. 280). As the feeling of not fitting in for these women was built in and through (professional) stories they were socialised into over the last two decades, it appears that we still have a long way to go until we "fit their lived experiences into the contours of more satisfactory and appropriate narratives [as] the dominant narratives in [academia and sport sciences] do not fit their own experiences, take care of them, or are problematic to live by" (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 281).

Storytelling is central to human existence, "stories instruct, they reveal, they inform in special ways" (Eisner, 1997, p. 5) as they help us make sense of our world and share that understanding with others. Furthermore, as the bricolage avoids the reductionism of other monological research approaches (Kincheloe, 2001), storytelling could carry out the richness and intersectionality of our data in the most sincere and creative way. Research has been published before via stories particularly on people and matters of the margins, like sports trauma stories, harassed women stories, etc. (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2016; Fisher, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2002). Stories capture the person and the context. They are dynamic, historically-, culturally- and value-based, time- and-place bound (Moen, 2006). Sharing two women sport scientists' transnational mobility outside the traditional structural borders of

research write up could amplify the meaning of their stories if other women connect with them and find within a road map that could help them navigate the future—which for all is unknown and uncertain yet for some is also frightening. According to Ellis (2007), “listening to and engaging in others’ stories is a gift and sometimes the best thing we can do for those in distress” (p. 26).

We share the story of two women here, as their stories became available to us. We knew the women and their transnational careers prior to inviting them to the study. The respect and trust we had for each other as persons and professionals allowed us to go beyond the enchanting migration stories. The story we tell is narrated with ‘we,’ the first-person plural personal pronoun, to reflect as best as possible proximity with the two women’s life stories and the directness of these women. Furthermore, ‘we’ gave us, researchers, partial ownership not only in the co-construction of the study but also of the story told.

## 5. On transnational migration

*At the onset of our academic journeys we didn’t plan, didn’t even think of building transnational careers. Migrating happened! Yes of course we chose to move, we were not forced, at least directly. We made the decision considering the options we had and moving abroad appeared to be the best of choices for our development ambitions or work prospects. The earliest decision was to move abroad in our graduate studies’ years because we thought we could get richer education experiences, knowledge, competences and skills in our science. Later on, we decided to move for work purposes like getting a job instead of waiting in line for a job or revitalizing our professional opportunities. Then again, we decided to move when the work and/or the environment was not what we regarded good for us. In certain circumstances, we were somewhat led to make the choice to move, in other circumstances we were privileged to have options from which moving was the preferred one. Growing older, we moved as skilled migrants and on some occasions were head-hunted.*

*When younger, along our development ambitions we also embraced the adventure side of migration, the opportunity to visit new countries, new worlds, new cultures, to meet new people, to make new friends, to explore the world outside of our nation. As we grew older and went from single-to family-life, we still embraced the adventure that every move entailed while we knew in the back of our heads that migrating with a family might be a bit more challenging than picking up and moving alone. Nonetheless, we embraced the opportunity to raise our children as citizens of the world, with rich cultural and linguistic experiences; we saw value in it. While we picked up the basics of new languages or improved a language we knew, at all instances we navigated our transnational migrations on the principle that it is all about communication and not language. At all places we landed, we saw value in meeting with the new culture while maintaining our native cultural heritage and respecting our roots, which at times proved to be trickier than we thought it would be. A challenge we met was the difficulty in some receiving cultures to comprehend the notion of transnationalism, the needs of the transnational (for self and family), and that acculturation is not a synonym of assimilation. Regardless of which country we called home for the moment being, we were proud of our native country and heritage and we never meant to give it up whilst eager to learn from the new culture and further develop as persons and professionals within their values, norms and traditions. Oftentimes, we were asked ‘How long do you plan to stay here?’ and we mumbled answers like, ‘I haven’t thought of it, home is here right now’ or ‘As long as I am happy living and working here.’ We still don’t have a good enough and honest answer to give considering that words like ‘always and forever’ have not been in our vocabulary but ‘good, meaningful work’, ‘potential’, ‘opportunities’, ‘meaningful relationships’, and ‘quality life’ are.*

## 6. Data collection and analysis

We started the data collection with face-to-face interviews, but due to hectic workloads and physical distance we continued with conversations through the phone, online meetings and electronic-mail exchanges. In the interviews, we asked the two women to share their

stories about building a career while moving to different countries and continents, we asked them about what made them and what challenged them, and how they kept going. We urged them to tell us stories that most people do not know of, stories that take place behind the front view. In the conversations, we asked for more of their stories, incidents and meanings that had been forgotten or overlooked in the formal interviews, we also asked to clarify things they shared and to elaborate further on story-details, aspects, meanings of these so we could co-create meaning (Harvey, 2015).

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim giving us a total of 56 pages of single-spaced text which we used in the analysis along with notes we took during the interviews and conversations. The texts were read by the authors independently and more notes were taken in the form of comments on each page. This notetaking was an effort to identify themes in the stories and/or questions for us to reflect on as researchers as well as more questions to ask the interviewees for better clarity and understanding. Once we felt that we had a good grasp of the life stories, the first author undertook the task to write a creative non-fiction. Drafts of the story were circulated to the interviewees for them to comment on freely and on two particular points: How is your story reflected here and how comfortable do you feel that your anonymity is protected? In all drafts, from the very first to the final one, the interviewees felt part of the story as it enclosed all they had shared in interviews and conversations. While the greater part of the story was lived by both women, the author had embedded small individual nuances in it which made them feel safe as blending of the shared and individual experiences within one story protected individual identities.

With regard to the analysis, we followed the narrative approach and particularly we integrated story analysis (thematic and performative) and storytelling (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). For Smith and Sparkes (2009) narrative analysis allows the researcher to see the personal and social sides of the stories; from the personal side, one can see how individuals shape the socio-cultural worlds they live and work in, whereas from the social side we see how the socio-cultural worlds that individuals live and work in shape them. In answering our research question, it was key to see both sides of the two women; how they shaped the migration, cultures and academic departments they journeyed, lived in and worked for, and how the migration, cultures and academic departments shaped (and reshaped) them. Thematic narrative analysis focuses on what is said, on themes present in the narratives yet without fracturing the data (Riessman, 2008) as our interest was case-centred, on the particular case of these women. Performative analysis focuses on the context, and narratives are seen as multi-voiced and co-constructed (Riessman, 2008). Accordingly, we paid attention to the context of the transnational migrations, and their multiple voices were key for re-storying their story. The story presented here moves between ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ just as we moved between story analysis and storytelling (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

## 7. On life on the move

*We completed education cycles abroad, we signed work contracts abroad. Eventually, we moved back home and later on migrated again in search of more promising work opportunities (and better work environments). We experienced migrating on our own but also with family; we experienced the honeymoon period of migration both at work and home with personal and family life, while we also lived some thriller-stories abroad. We moved with best of intentions and plans in mind and some moves were delightful and inspiring, when the give-and-take between the host and us, newcomers, was balanced and we felt valued and respected. Other times, we were called to revisit all that we planned and dreamed of along with what we knew about ourselves and life.*

*In what we came to call, thriller stories, we had to revisit our plans, aspirations, ways of being and doing. As academics devoted to their work, these enigmatic stories usually started with some change in our work terms, like contractual obligations being altered, agreements stopped being respected by*

leaders. When what you bring in as a scholar shifts from being a strength, an advantage to becoming a problem, an inconvenience and you go from being included and wanted to being excluded, ostracised, even hunted down, questions (and doubts) arise; what happened, what did I do, what did I miss, is this happening to me or with me? And remember, we were migrants living in a country away from our support system. Sometimes, getting answers to such questions was next to impossible, and day-by-day the 'feel of not fitting in' started to set in. We went from being engaged, invested and loyal to our jobs and departments, to hiding away, losing enthusiasm, not knowing whom to trust. But our upbringing and sport lives taught us to endure, hence every turmoil and ending taught us something and every start made us smile as it renewed our faith in the goodness of people, to sport, sport sciences, and academia – even when our faith was questioned by toxic leaders, broken contracts and agreements.

While living life on the move, we made friends for life, we built strong professional networks, we conceptualized and delivered good work, worthwhile for the sports-world of the host country (and our CVs, of course). Looking back at our professional lives, they are made of dreams and ambitions, suitcases and airplanes, promises and shattered dreams, highways and obstacle-courses, negotiations and lessons learned, smiles and tears, experience gained and growth, hello's and goodbye's, and more than anything else renewed faith in the self and the world. The foundation of all these was our love for what we did, so we worked hard to stick with it.

## 8. Transnationalism

Transnationalism refers to “sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation-states” (Vertovec, 2009, p. 2) and has become one of the key perspectives to understanding contemporary migratory movements. Although movements across national borders have always taken place, it has intensified in the last decades and created increased cultural hybridisation and global connectivity (Ryba et al., 2018). Research on transnationalism ‘took off’ in the 1990s when scholars started to theorise the ‘new’ type of migratory patterns and subjectivities (e.g., Schiller et al., 1992; Portes et al., 1999; Smith, & Guarnizo, 1998). Transnational migration literature departs from the ‘traditional’ immigration conceptualisation in accentuating on-going cross-border movements rather than an intent to settle permanently, and therefore involves different tensions and patterns of adaptation. For example, learning the local language and ‘fitting in’ the broader society might not be the central aim of transnational migrants, who might envision their futures in yet another country if and when an opportunity arises (Ronkainen et al., 2019; Ryba et al., 2018). Furthermore, it has been noted that many high-skilled transnational migrants design their lives in a hybrid cultural space that it is “lived and felt beyond the homeland-hostland connection” (Colic-Peisker, 2006, p. 211). Although skilled transnational migrants certainly enjoy privileges and are often able to advance their careers through building transnational networks, pursuing a transnational life does not come without potential personal costs. For example, the ISSP position stand “Transnationalism, mobility, and acculturation in and through sport” (Ryba et al., 2018) warned that athlete migrants might experience serious difficulties and costs in terms of identity and mental health problems which might contribute to a premature career termination.

## 9. On negotiating

*Negotiating has been about making progress, about taking steps; some steps were forward, big and solid but then again other steps we took were sideways even backwards, also tiny and clumsy. No matter what, we took all steps we saw as essential (because we saw meaning), small ones and strides in the size of leaps of faith. In the negotiations we made behind our steps, sometimes we bargained for an advantage for us, like getting a job abroad, keeping our job when bullied, ostracised or in the verge of being fired. We also bargained for others, like for colleagues to be treated with dignity – when*

*colleagues wouldn't or couldn't use their voices, we would lend ours (sometimes we were asked to do so and at times we volunteered). Other times we negotiated for collective advantages, to shape outcomes, like to design and deliver courses/programs of substance or to develop and empower more women in the men-dominated worlds of sports, sports sciences and academia. We bargained for what we thought was good, right, appropriate and necessary for the higher causes we believed in, that of progressing science, serving the missions of academia and sport, helping others, being persons of integrity; we were definitely not shy.*

*We also negotiated the relationships we built. While we made new friends in the host countries we moved, and when looking back in time it appears that we built some life-long friendships and networks, in our transnational journeys we negotiated between the known and the unknown in people. The negotiation was about people we felt that we could relate with (known culture) and those we didn't relate with (unknown culture). Of course, in too many occasions the known won, as we chose to relate with and rely for understanding and help on persons and practices with who and which we felt culturally comfortable. Cultural comfort was not only about ethnic culture but also sport culture, gender or age culture or education culture, and any culture we knew of that gave us a sense of comfort and relatedness. Eventually, as we became more comfortable with mobility and life in new places away from home, we made some great personal friends and professional allies of different culture(s).*

*To go through some of the tougher negotiations, somewhere down the line of time and places we mastered a way of coping with pain, injustice, uncontrollable events and behaviours; we became very efficient at what we would see and take with us from every situation we encountered. We learned quickly that in any strenuous situation there are overt and covert boundaries and negotiations to be undertaken, sometimes very basic but still demanding ones, like do I enter or steer clear, do I simply show up or actually stand up, how far do I fight, is it the battle or the war that matters, or when an undesirable negotiation's outcome was presented to us, do I shrink or rise. The backbone in our way of coping was a strong sense of free will. Exercising our free will allowed us to see the good fast enough and move past any feelings of doubt, loss, hurt, anger, shame. We learned by experience that the longer we withheld hurtful feelings and thoughts, the harder it was to live everyday life. So, when we met with occurrences like others setting terms and conditions that were outside our contractual agreements or when we were shown the way out, we were quick to move from perceiving rejection to perceiving clarity over different needs, wants, plans, approaches with the person or group. At any such point in time and space, we were free to choose to see what was valuable as a lesson to be learned, how we advanced, how we became better, stronger. Free will allowed us to make adequately determined choices to feel empowered to keep moving forward.*

## 10. Academics as mobilised professionals

A number of studies have drawn on a transnational framework to study high-skilled migrants including academics (Leemann, 2010; Li et al., 2018; Plöger & Kubiak, 2019). Scholars have noted that mobility has become an accepted characteristic of academic work and “a pre-requisite for career biographies” (Plöger & Kubiak, 2019, p. 307). Beyond a personal desire to advance their careers and perhaps explore the world, especially early-career academics are increasingly expected to pursue mobility if they hope to secure funding and continue their academic careers (Leemann, 2010; Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020). Similar to stories shared in this research, previous studies have shown that, despite the structural push for mobility and precarious employment opportunities, academic migration is often conceived primarily as an individual choice and intense competition and personal responsibility for career success are conceived ‘a normal’ part of the journey (Plöger & Kubiak, 2019). Academic professionals, like our participants, are culturally encouraged to narrate their mobility experiences as enriching and contributing to their career development. However, the women who shared their stories with us were vocal about the personal and relational costs that were part of pursuing a

transnational career, which is also demonstrated by previous studies (Leemann, 2010; Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020). This is especially true for women beyond the early-career stage with families and other social responsibilities, who often face more barriers to live up to the mobile academic entrepreneur ideal than their male counterparts (Leemann, 2010) and, as our study shows, often have to negotiate a lot in making their ways.

The institutionalisation of transnational mobility as indispensable for career advancement has also been argued to contribute to the reproduction of gender inequalities in academia, as women are less likely to be able to live up to the flexible academic entrepreneur ideal than their male counterparts (Jöns, 2011; Leemann, 2010). Academic mobility has profound consequences for the partnerships and families of the migrants, and the costs are often higher for women. Vohlídalová (2014) found that academic women going on fellowships abroad often migrated alone with their partners staying in the home country, whereas with academic men there was a normalised expectation that their partners will follow – even if that often results in disruption of the partner's work career. As such, expectations for who is making concessions in transnational families are often gendered, and several women in Vohlídalová's (2014) study admitted that pursuing transnational mobility in their careers had been one reason for breaking up with their partners. However, scholars have also stressed the dynamic nature of 'doing' and 'undoing' gender and showed how some mobile academics and their spouses engage in diverse gender practices and rearrange the gender configurations to fit their changing situations (Schaer et al., 2017). However, Schaer et al. (2017) also found that having children often became a key turning point in couples' gender practices, leading them to shift closer to traditional gendered roles in parenting.

## 11. On redirecting

*Our daily multi-tasking was complex and demanding, asking us to perform as transnationals (travelling, setting up life, acculturating), as academics (researching, teaching, advising, networking, collaborating, sharing, travelling), as caretakers (children, parents, some more travelling), as partners (husbands, significant others, travelling a bit again), as friends, and usually lastly as us (ending up avoiding travelling for vacation). That's a lot to do for one person! Moving abroad, whether alone or with family, is not as exciting luxurious touring as some like to believe, it's tough and complicated. As some of our daily stories were beautiful and some rough, we also became good at redirecting the rough stories and shaping (and re-shaping) narratives that would serve us well in living everyday life and not shying away from it.*

*Besides some rough days here and there, we also lived some long rough and low periods as at times we couldn't shake off hurt, injustice or shame overnight. Getting to these low periods, it has never been one thing going wrong and throwing us off balance. Usually, it was a few things being off track for extended periods of time. So, in this 'privileged, world-traveller' life of ours, we had periods with no confidence left in us, no motivation to get out of bed, we lived with insomnia and physical pain manifesting our emotional pains and struggles. In times like this, we had to learn to ask for help and to accept help from significant others, friends, colleagues, leaders, therapists. To do so, we negotiated and redirected narratives. We negotiated with ourselves what asking and getting help means and redirected the narrative that portrays the need for help as a sign of weakness. Before we could ever ask for help, we also had to redirect the narrative we built for ourselves through the years (with some help from family and significant persons) portraying us as strong self-serving women, and find a new narrative that was accepting us as good and enough when feeling weak from time to time, and as being okay to admit aloud this 'weak' feeling.*

*Of course, we were also living the professional narrative of academic teachers and sport psychology practitioners, which portrays individuals always strong and present to help students, athletes, coaches. There came a time that this narrative wasn't helping us either and we had to negotiate that one too for a kinder narrative, a more self-caring and self-compassionate one.*

*What we found to be equally challenging with our inner negotiations was for others to hear us say, 'I feel down today and could use some love, tender and care', 'Can you sit here and listen to me without trying to fix me' or 'I need you to help me fix things.' These were the most difficult stories to redirect, what others saw in us, what they expected of us, what they had in mind about helping us. Ultimately, we learned that this was not our story and we had to let go of any effort to change others.*

## 12. Ethical considerations

As psychology researchers we follow the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2017) for ethical research. In this particular study, we privileged relational ethics over procedural ethics (i.e., institutional board approval). Relational ethics is situated in the interpersonal relationship to highlight connectedness between researcher and researched as well as between researchers and the communities in which they live and work (Ellis, 2007). In doing research with intimate others (e.g., friends, family members, etc.), relational ethics facilitated our reflection on values, mutual respect, dignity, and how we engaged with and cared for each other in collaborative research. Considering our pre-existing relationship with the interviewees, the non-invasive yet sensitive nature of the study, and the protection of participant identity we wished to provide, we embraced a relational care approach and our research was guided by the relational ethics question "What should [we] do now?" rather than the statement "This is what [we] should do now" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). In particular, relational ethics became meaningful in how we cared to collaboratively construct criteria to judge and to facilitate our conduct in both the research process and the manuscript production. For instance, during the analysis and writing of the paper, prolonged conversations with the interviewees took place until we all agreed on how findings should be represented to ensure integrity for all while safeguarding anonymity for them and third-party persons. The fact that we were all adult women, skilled researchers in sport science with transnational experiences facilitated how we managed to treat them, their stories and ourselves with dignity, tell their stories without violating their privacy, protect identities, and of course safeguard our relationships. Upon inviting our participants, each one was informed about the study's purpose and procedures and we discussed together matters of person and personal stories (data) treatment. Prior to the interviews, consent was obtained regarding participation, the potential decision to withdraw from the study, and for audio-recording the interviews.

## 13. Fitting work with life and life with work

*While negotiating the terms of our professional development and advancement, we also had to negotiate life at home and living these two lives at the same time wasn't like a walk in the park on a sunny day. The truth of the matter, we were not living very traditional, conventional lives when being away from our families for two to three days per week, living on our own or with colleagues in student-like apartments. In theory, we knew a lot about balancing work and home life and in practice, we were good at assisting others finding their balances. When it came to practice balance for us, guilt was a commonly experienced state of mind and soul. We were feeling guilty for not working enough when having to care for new-borns, toddlers, teenagers, parents, home chores, and self. At the same time, we were also feeling guilty for working too much and not giving enough time and space to significant people in our lives and to ourselves. There were times that we didn't know which guilt to choose for the day to go about. To navigate between work and home life, we used a lot of swapping, we swapped chores and identities; sometimes we used work as a distraction from overwhelming child-rearing and home tasks and other times we used family and fun to make it through overwhelming work matters.*

*Our partners, friends and family supported us and took on tasks of childrearing and home life to give us hours to read, to write, to travel; sometimes our partners did so at the expense of their professional lives. Then*

there were times when we had to take steps back and give our partners time to be and do as persons and professionals. Any side we would choose appeared to have opportunity costs, like lost projects and jobs, broken relationships, lost moments from our children's lives that we learned to live with. As we were transiting from phase to phase, from place to place, work was a priority and we moulded life at home as best as possible to fit with work – yet always trying to be a good mother, partner, friend. We don't know when or where we made such a prioritization decision, and if we actually made a conscious decision or the love and passion we had for sport and science, the determination to achieve, along with the desire to help others made the decision for us. Today, we are inclined to say it was the latter; the decision was made somewhat unconsciously, silently and was not communicated aloud either to us or to others.

The work-home life we chose to live had some challenging negotiations to tackle, like what is a good mother, what is a good partner and what is a good academic. The fight was between traditional women roles, expectations for prioritising family and making a career as a woman in the demanding men-dominated world of sport science. Looking back, it makes no sense using conventional standards for negotiating an unconventional life. Finally, we had to come up with our own definitions of what makes a good mother or partner (and academic), and accept that there were days when we did good and days when we failed our kids, partners and selves yet we kept going because we are the strong ones, we couldn't back down or quit.

#### 14. Research quality

Quality of qualitative research is a contentious matter and there are enduring tensions around the researcher role, ethics, and the role of 'validation' procedures in the production of the interpretive account (e. g., Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019; Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes, 1998). While positivism which informed early qualitative research in sport psychology aimed at detached observations, contemporary scholarship increasingly considers researcher's involvement as an asset, rather than a threat, in the production of high-quality qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019). At this point, it should be clear that as authors we are far from removed from this research: we care about this study and it has touched us emotionally. Rather than considering our involvement a conflict of interest, we consider our positionality as women sport science academics as a potential strength that can sensitise us to detect layers of meaning that could be missed by researchers without such resonance. As Mohanty (1993) argued, "in a gender-stratified society women's experiences are often significant repositories of oppositional knowledge" (p. 51), continuing that "the theoretical notion 'women's lives' refers not just to the experiences of women, but also to a particular social arrangement of gender relations and hierarchies that can be analyzed and evaluated" (ibid). As such, the study did not simply aim at capturing these women's experiences, but to shed light on the socio-cultural constitution of women's transnational academic careers and the psychological work that is required to navigate the challenges in the hybrid transnational space and the tensions in negotiating the identities of 'a woman' and 'an academic'.

Despite the significant disagreements evident in scholarship on rigour of qualitative research in sport psychology, we agree with the shared contentions that the quality of qualitative research is not an outcome of standardised procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019). Instead, we consider the researchers' reflexive and critical engagement with the empirical data, the quality of the inferences that are made, and the plausibility of the interpretive account as key indicators of rigour and quality. In our research, all co-authors were actively involved in all stages of the research process and in developing and contesting interpretations. A form of "participant perspective" check (interpretive validity; Maxwell, 1992, p. 288) with our participants made us more confident that we had faithfully interpreted their intentions, beliefs, experiences, and meanings. In addition to concerns about a truthful representation of these women's experiences, we centralised the need to form ethical research relationships with our

participants where our obligation to protect their best interest took primacy at all times (Ellis, 2007; Etherington, 2007).

#### 15. On accepting

Building a career didn't come easy, it came with a lot of work, lots of transiting, negotiating, redirecting and finally accepting. We had to accept boundaries, failures, behaviours and traditions that we could not change, borders we could not cross. Of course, building an academic career is demanding both for men and women but over the years as we developed our female consciousness we realized (and accepted) that certain challenges are unique for us women. People talk about gender equality and progress towards it, but to us, gender equality is still in the sphere of wishful thinking. Today, we remain in the era of gender inequality. Yes, of course, progress has been made, and it has been made in two particular ways: (i) the world has gotten better at seeing us women as competent individuals and giving us, or to be precise, giving to some of us opportunities to dream, to step forward, to develop, to create, to capitalize, to achieve, and (ii) the world has gotten better at hiding the harmful gender-based barriers and stereotypes under the carpet by being very politically correct or in some cultures by being very polite. We are proud with how far we have come as academics, but we are not complacent about the opportunities for women in academia today, and we contend this based on lived experiences, so please don't bother to dispute the hardships we have endured. Take our word for it, we lived and live the inequality and we came to grips with it, and we work with it and around it – we are not complaining but intend to keep speaking up and negotiating.

Through our career journeys, we have come to accept a few more nuances, like as a transnational you are always a 'foreigner, not fully belonging' with the locals. When work is rolling, we are a team but when disagreements arise, we are easily singled out; few colleagues will dare to stand on our side while the majority will look away. It seems that it is not only us who choose to stick with the 'known culture,' our colleagues do the same when challenged. We also learned that as women aspiring to achieve in a men-dominated culture not only we have to fight with men but with some women too. Usually, these women appear to be strong, either because of some position title, achievements or connection with a person of decision-making power. Women can damage women; it's a reality we don't talk about openly, but it happens. When we were younger and developing, more women were supportive of us but as we developed and landed on our own feet, fewer remained true collaborators on our side.

One more thing we had to come to grips with is when the terms of work change, and we have to accept what we cannot change and either flow with it or move on – the choice is there. After a lot and hard reflection on the whole of our life-journey, we are keen that 'from here on we won't accept a career at all costs.' What does this mean? It means that our priorities have shifted. From a personal perspective quality of life and wellbeing and from the professional perspective meaningful research and collaborations are more important than a few more externally funded projects, publications and invitations.

#### 16. Closing comments on telling stories that work for us

With this paper, we have sought to expand understandings of transnational mobility in sport and exercise psychology by focusing on the career experiences of women sport scientists. By sharing these women's stories, we have uncovered certain forms of professional development and learning that are not part of the 'official' narratives of career development offered to students and early career academics. Our findings destabilise the academic entrepreneur ideal (Leemann, 2010) and show how migration involves its thrills, but also difficult negotiations and challenges to crafting a story, as well as living a life that 'works'. Focusing on academic women who often face gender-based inequalities and whose careers have been somewhat underexplored in research (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017), we voiced the 'silenced' part of the academic narrative that we hope can have an impact on how people think, feel, and go about careers in sport sciences. As Smith (2010)

emphasised, “We not only tell stories, but *do* things with them. Stories do things *to, on, and for* people that can make a *difference*. They help *guide action; constitute human realities*; and help frame *who we are and who we can be*” (p. 88).

The transnational dimension—which is increasingly a normative component of academic careers—creates another layer of complexity to academic lives and might be especially challenging for women to navigate (Jöns, 2011). For the women in our study, who built, lived and live transnational careers, work and home are a state of mind, are about values, meaning and comfort in the here and now. If life is a dance, they dance a lot while swapping partners between home and work, work and home. In building their careers, free will (James, 1956) empowered them to find their ways, to mould paths and to shape amazing journeys. Experiences and lessons learned from past relocations informed subsequent relocations. The ultimate lesson was becoming fast learners at hardships; they regained control over self, home and work with the act of overcoming a hardship when extracting a lesson learned as fast as possible and looking forward. Negotiating has been a meaningful process for paving the way and handling boundaries (see Gerson & Peiss, 1985), it enabled them to develop, to endure, and to maintain their values. Redirecting their stories (Wilson, 2011) into stories that work for them has been their way of coping, while accepting is an essential approach for living through heavens and hells and staying true to self.

While we are resistant to offering a list of recommendations, we want to offer our critical reflections on the potential value of our findings for the reader. Our findings destabilise the post-feminist discourses promising that women can ‘have it all’ (Duffy & Hund, 2015) and remind of the structural and cultural barriers that women have to negotiate in crafting careers while also caring for their families and themselves. In so far as careers are narratively constructed and rely on available narrative resources, sharing these women’s stories about *actually* living the academic life has served to expand narrative resources surrounding careers in academia, helping early-career academics in sport sciences in thinking about whether they *can* or *want* to pursue a career in the contemporary neoliberal university. Sharing these stories is particularly important because researchers have demonstrated that graduate students are often not well prepared for the complexities of academic life (Austin, 2002; Bieber & Worley, 2006).

While serving as a resource for early-career academic women for imagining their futures, the story shared in this research is also meant for those academics who might not have migrated, but who work with transnational colleagues, to gain a glimpse to the life and world of the transnational migrant. As Schinke et al. (2015) reminded, cultural transitions can have a different impact on the migrant’s well-being depending on whether the demand of acculturation is ‘shouldered’ (i. e., placed solely on the migrant) or shared with the people in the receiving organization. The hope is that those pursuing academic careers will not only construct careers (like our participants) but can also feel they are ‘fitting in’ and are understood. Nonetheless, the story we told is also for mainstream men colleagues, white, Christian, heterosexuals of all career stages and levels, as firsthand introduction to what ‘non fitting in looks and feels like’ for their colleague in the office next door.

We have highlighted gendered elements of career development, but also want to emphasise that our findings should not be essentialised as ‘women’s experiences’ in general. Our participants were white, heterosexual women who also experienced privileges certainly not available to all women. We are hopeful that future studies will explore and share narratives of women sport scientists from a broader demographic as well as various geographic locations to expand understandings of career development in our field, especially in relation to inequalities of opportunity and ways to combat them.

While we do not know yet whether and how this story will make a difference for the reader, we know it has done ‘things’ for us as researchers and for the women who participated in the research. Working on the Transnational Careers project of ours, helped us overcome the

feeling of loneliness, of being the only one who’s experiencing challenges with work and home life as a woman, high-achiever, candid, transnational, academic in sport sciences. Which one of these characteristics might be the ‘problematic’ one, we are unsure. Possibly one, few, all of them or none and the ‘problem’ is elsewhere and not on us – this was not in the scope of our study to explore. Listening, taking apart and re-storying the stories helped us sort out what happened, provided indirect answers to questions that have been left unanswered for too long and lifted some of the weight we are carrying on our shoulders. Knowing that other women sport scientists of different ethnic backgrounds, upbringing, ages, who moved around few different countries and cultures, experience similar hurdles (achievements and thrills also), gave us confidence that some conflictual situations cannot be blamed on us alone. Exploring the literature on women’s careers helped us in locating our challenges in the broader structural and cultural systems that contribute to (lack of) opportunities as well as understandings of how transnational mobility can create new inequalities or opportunities. The literature, the interviews, the conversations, the reflections, and the writing of this paper contributed to our learning, to our development as persons and professionals, and more than anything, gave us the strength to keep loving and living what we do just as we are. And today, as we type the last words for this paper, we all sit comfortably with the uncertainty of how our stories will unfold in the future.

#### Author statement

With regard to the paper “Negotiating a Transnational Career Around Borders: Women’s Stories in Boundaryless Academia” all authors have read and approved the version R2 of the manuscript (PSE\_2020\_504) being submitted. We warrant that the article is our original work, hasn’t received prior publication and isn’t under consideration for publication elsewhere.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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