Playing by the rules of academia? The impact of an international research project on the professional identity development of early-career academics in sport management

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

The purpose of this study is to examine how participating in an international research project (IRP) can impact the way early-career academics (ECAs) perceive academia and thus their professional identity development. Based on neoinstitutional theory, we examine autoethnographic memory stories of six ECAs within sport management who participated in an international research project (IRP). These ECAs experienced an important professional socialization process into the institutional logics of sport management academia. We found that the academics' perception of doing research was influenced by reflection processes of and within the prevailing logics of the organizational field of sport management academia. ECAs benefit from participating in IRPs as they foster the ability to develop career decisions that will benefit them personally and professionally. The paper highlights opportunities of IRPs in contributing to transferable skill development for ECAs and concludes with recommendations for doctoral students and educators.

1. Introduction

Early-career academics[1] (ECAs) very often struggle to find their place in academia. They face multiple challenges in orientating themselves in this competitive environment, such as continuous research development, teaching, and mentoring students (Hicks, 2012; McKay & Monk, 2017). Academics are caught in their organizational field and the (unwritten) rules that apply therein DiMaggio and Powell (1983); Scott (2014). The decisions they make and the paths they take are pivotal to their success in academia (Nicholls, 2005). ECAs react to signals from the institution and colleagues and comply with those strategies and collaborations, which seem beneficial for their careers and institutional reputation (Acker & Webber, 2017; Aprile, Ellem & Lole, 2020). Studies on professional identity development in higher education claim that *significant experiences*, both negative and positive, highly impact on the professional identity of ECAs (Monereo & Liesa, 2020). Such experiences are often related to doctoral publishing and have implications for the

relationship with academic advisors, colleagues and peers (Sweitzer, 2009). We regard the active participation in an international research project (IRP) as a significant experience that has the potential to shape ECAs' professional identity development through the socialization to the *rules of the game in academia.* However, the impact of IRPs in the professional identity development of ECAs has not been addressed in the higher education literature to date.

In this study, we examine *how the participation within an IRP can impact the way ECAs perceive academia and their professional identity development.*

Based on neoinstitutional theory we examine the case of six ECAs within the academic field of sport management who participated in an Erasmus+ research project funded by the European Union (EU) over the course of two years (European Commission, n., d.). We employ a collective biography, as we aim to include the embodied experiences of ECAs. With this approach, we answer the call of past research for further autoethnographic and critical reflection of doctoral programs (Davies

et al., 2019; Farrell, Oerton & Plant, 2018). In addition, with the application of a profound theoretical framework developed in organization studies, we contribute to knowledge about the career development of ECAs and their professional socialization processes into academia. Based on the results, we discuss mechanisms and drivers for a shift in perspectives and effect that an IRP can have on the professional identity development of ECAs.

2. Theoretical background

We base our study on neoinstitutional theory, presupposing that institutions and their underlying logics are socially constructed by shared meanings, rules, norms, belief systems, structures, and processes, and have regulative effects on the strategic and structural behavior of actors within an organizational field (Alford & Friedland, 1985; Scott, 2014). Scott and Meyer (1985) refer to organizational fields as a set of interdependent populations of organizations participating in the same cultural and social sub-system, such as higher education institutions (HEIs). Neo-institutional theorists suggest that for surviving and being recognized as legitimate actors in their organizational field, organizations are pressured to conform to institutional logics, even though alternative logics may be more desirable or efficient (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman, 1995). Conformance to institutional logics can be achieved in three ways, which produce isomorphic effects: coercive (through pressure on the organization), mimetic (mimicking other organizations) and normative (the spread of professional norms through network, formal education and work experiences) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The dominant logic in academia is that of teaching, research, and service (Hicks, 2012; McKay & Monk, 2017). High pressure regarding research productivity and sophistication causes considerable role ambiguity for groups of actors in the organizational field, such as the professoriate or the doctorate (e.g. Hartung et al., 2017).

As opposed to the prevailing macro view of institutional theory on organizational fields, more recent works focus on the micro level in analyzing agency within organizations. This actor-based view captures de-institutionalization processes, arguing that organizational actors do not only seek to conform to institutional logics, but actively manipulate them with the goal to decouple their practices from the rules, norms, belief systems, structures, and processes engrained in dominant logics (Oliver, 1991). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006)) introduced the concept of "institutional work", referring to purposive actions of organizational actors aimed at maintaining institutions, as well as disrupting existing institutions and creating new ones. Symon, Buehring, Johnson and Cassell (2008) argued that the conflicted, fragmented, and ambiguous organizational field of academia is suitable for exploring institutional work since the competing requirements and prescriptions (Scott, 2014) have much potential to cause constant changes.

The literature on academic disciplines suggests that institutionalization processes within the epistemic domain are concerned with how norms and practices for research, research agenda-setting, and incentives and rewards manifest as standards (Lenoir, 1997; Symon et al., 2008). These standards often define research logics, such as methods of inquiry or levels of theory development that are applied within the discipline or field and vary strongly within and between academic disciplines (Goldman, 1995). Academic fields and advocated paradigms therein evolve and change over time (Kuhn, 1962). Relatedly, the applicable norms and practices are neither strictly binding nor permanent, making the "game" within academia rather opaque. Meanwhile, HEIs represent the institutionalized organizations for academia and their affiliated actors. They are characterized by great diversity, which can be explained by the different legal, geographical, cultural, epistemic, and organizational environments, in which they operate (Breitbarth, Walzel & van Eekeren, 2019). The organizational domain influences ECAs' responses to institutional logics as well as the epistemological and ontological convictions that prevail in their affiliated HEIs (Goldman, 1995). ECAs are often exposed to normative and mimetic pressures exerted by their supervisors and senior colleagues, and they tend to respond in a fashion that favors their career aspirations and their recognition as legitimate actors by mimicking the research logics of those superiors on whom they depend (Geurin-Eagleman & McNary, 2014).

ECAs have great potential to carry out institutional work by "radically envisioning the antecedents, the outcomes or the very nature of a particular organizational phenomenon" (Prasad, 2013, p. 941) in their field. Prasad (2013) argued that young academics have diverse academic and professional backgrounds and that because they are not fully socialized into the institutional logics or ethos of their discipline, they may be most capable of thinking outside of the box. Significant experiences within their early-career impact the professional identity development of ECAs (Monereo & Liesa, 2020). Based on our theoretical stance, we respond to our research question, by (a) examining the professional socialization process of ECAs into the institutional logics of their organizational field, and (b) showing how they contest institutional logics by referring to their experiences in relation to a significant experience.

3. Method

We used an autoethnographic approach with the aim to connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. In their autoethnographic study, Davies, McGregor and Horan (2019) highlight that a strength of this method is that it allows for incorporation of self-reflexivity and maps the professional socialization of doctoral students. In collective biography methodology, a group of researchers write about their memory stories on a specific topic or time. We use this method in which "the work begins, proceeds and ends with a focus on theory, as we understand it through the lens of lived experience, with our bodies and our memories as discursive/textual sites" (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 14). The authors critically reflect, discuss, and analyze memory stories as a collective, searching for patterns, similarities, and differences (Hartung et al., 2017). In response to criticism concerning the lack of rigor, Davies et al. (2019) highlight the manifold benefits and depth of autoethnography as a meaningful methodology to analyze the interactions between individual experiences and cultures of researchers, respectively. Using the approach of a collective biography implies that the authors are part of the process they examine (Davies & Gannon, 2006).

3.1. Our collective biography

This study examines the perspectives of six ECAs (between 28 and 39 years of age at the time the project began) who actively participated in an EU-funded research project within sport management from 2017 to 2019. Backed by transnational policy initiatives over the last few decades, the dominant logic in academia to an increasing extent involves international research collaborations, since they provide opportunities for funding, getting involved in solving societal problems, developing new research instruments and methods, and increasing the mobility of scholars (Youtie, Li, Rogers & Shapira, 2017). In following Youtie et al. (2017) and their discussion of international university research ventures, we argue that (EU-funded) IRPs represent an institutionalization of international research collaborations since they carry a formal name and agreement, require a formally appointed project coordinator, and receive support, such as governmental funding. Relatedly, we assert the participation in such a project to be a *significant experience* for ECAs (Monereo & Liesa, 2020). Being aware of its institutionalized nature, we denote the IRP under scrutiny as an actor in the organizational field of sport management (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). There is ongoing debate around whether sport management academia is a distinct academic discipline (Chalip, 2006). According to Dowling (2018), sport management academia has not yet produced an internally consistent body of knowledge and failed to establish a specific professional culture and

therefore is a "semi or quasi-profession" (p.1). This status as a semi or quasi-discipline and -profession is mirrored by a variety of organizations in sport management academia, such as HEIs.

It was the vision of the IRP to herald a new age of sport management education by implementing alternative arrangements to existing sport management curricula at the individual HEIs of participating researchers, backed by research and to inspire other HEIs to follow. The project was implemented within nine European countries and included biyearly project meetings and independent research phases. The heterogeneous group of ECAs included three doctoral students, two PhD graduates, and one graduate student with a project manager role (Table 1). The participation within the IRP resulted to have been a novel academic experience for all six. The ECAs had not met before the project (apart from colleagues from the same country) and have stayed in personal and professional contact since the end of the project.

A reunion between three of the authors initiated this research project, as we realized that our reflections on and personal opinions of participation within the project varied greatly. Acknowledging the lack of literature on the impact of IRPs on professional identity development among ECAs, we wanted to analyze and give voice to our perceptions to understand the effects of this significant experience on our professional development. Triggered by the significant change of perspective on research as a result of participating in the common project (see Section 4.4), Emma had recently become involved in an autoethnographic project outside her usual institutional environment. Motivated by this new experience, she composed a prompt to collect our individual experiences in the form of a collective biography to analyze the narratives of our experiences and find differences and commonalities. Following this methodology, we wrote and analyzed memory stories in response to the following prompt: "Think of a time that the participation within the IRP made you change the way you think about research". We asked all six researchers to write approximately one page on the topic in May-June 2019. We examined the stories (693 words on average) through discussions and analysis in spring/summer 2020 via email and video conferences.

3.2. Data analysis

We analyzed the data through a theoretical thematic analysis that aims to code every part of the text relevant to or directly addressing the research question (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This leads to a detailed analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All four authors took part in a comprehensive reading of the stories. Each did a primary coding of the stories which was sent to the others via email. Building on discussions in seven video conferences (lasting between 1.5 and 3.5 h), potential themes were identified and discussed (Finlay, 2003). Emerging themes included personal growth and reflection, professional growth, leadership, conflicts, new public management processes, and professional socialization process. Discussions focused on how the themes related to each other and how they related to the research question. This form of

Table 1
ECAs participating in the study by career status, start of academic career, country and gender.

ECA[*]	Career status	Start of academic career	Country	Gender
William[**]	Doctoral student	2017	Norway	Male
Nora[**]	Associate professor	2013	Norway	Female
Pablo	Associate professor	2014	Spain	Male
Peter	Project manager	2015	Denmark	Male
Emma[**]	Doctoral student	2016	Germany	Female
Thomas[**]	Doctoral student	2013	Germany	Male

[*] Due to anonymity reasons we use pseudonyms when quoting the ECAs.
[**] Authors of this article.

thematic analysis guided our interpretation of the data and helped us make "sense of it" (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3353). Upon reaching an agreement on the themes and codes, two of the authors began the process of (re)reading and (re)coding the texts for a neoinstitutional analysis (e.g. institutionalized behavior, normative pressures, coercive pressures, and institutionalization of epistemology and ontology).

4. Results and discussion

In this section, we present and discuss the journey of ECAs while participating in an IRP which changed their way of thinking about academia. We present this path in the form of four short sections. The main storyline evolves around the memories of six ECAs and their perceptions of being socialized into the field of sport management academia by "playing [or not] by pre-established rules of the game of academia" (Prasad, 2013, p. 937).

4.1. Initial situation: institutional logics in the organizational field of sport management academia

The multicultural nature of the project and the opportunity to "construct an appropriate identity trajectory" (Casey & Fletcher, 2017, p. 107) to advance their professional and intellectual profiles strongly motivated the ECAs to partake in the IRP. It was perceived to be "an honor and motivating to be part of an Erasmus+ project" (William). In particular, the diversity in the IRP promised to contribute significantly to their professional development, as Nora pointed out: "I have always found value in the collaboration between more experienced researchers and junior researchers as well as younger and older researchers". Nora related her involvement directly to her academic position: "The research topic […] is of immense importance to my work at my university […]. The results of the research will enable me to make profound decisions in my job and help me become/be a recognized expert in the field". Advancing their professional and intellectual profiles is a conformant response to normative pressures exerted by dominant logics of the field. In this sense, the ECAs had a sense of a *right* way of doing research, which was based on their professional socialization into the values, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors of the organizational and epistemic domains of sport management academia. An adherence to those would allow them to be successful and become legitimate actors in the field (see also Åkerlind, 2008; Tierney, 1997).

Academic research is an integral element of national innovation systems, and with the introduction of so-called performance-based research funding systems as part of new public management, such as the *sexenio* in Spain (adapted in 1989) and the Norwegian model (adapted in 2006), national governments exert coercive pressures on academia and directly link research funding to national policy goals, thus increasing competition between organizations in the field (Hicks, 2012).

The pressure to produce research output, quality, and visibility is commonly understood as important in sport management academia, and thus within IRPs carried out in the field. One participant, Pablo, "developed a frenetic research activity in different fields of sport sciences in recent years", which might be a response to normative pressures for being a legitimate actor in the field, by contributing considerable research output (Dowling, 2018; Hird & Pfotenhauer, 2017) as well as for economic reasons, since the coercive pressure of research productivity might benefit him financially (Hicks, 2012). Furthermore, academic publications are seen as "quality propositions for one's own professional development" (Nora), in particular if one pursues an academic career path, for example, as a postdoctoral researcher or when trying to secure tenure-track positions (Åkerlind, 2008; Prasad, 2013).

Since, in an increasingly globalized world, policy goals often transcend national boundaries, the ECAs commonly understood the set framework of the IRP as a legitimate way of conducting research in their organizational field. One ECA emphasized the trust and credibility that he perceived the academic community to ascribe to EU-funded projects:

[EU research] reports appeared to me to be of high quality in terms of structure, contents, language and complexity. I trusted these documents and I believed that other people would trust them as well. I was convinced that these EU-backed and funded studies, specifically their results and policy implications, are powerful instruments in influencing decision-makers in policy areas in EU member states. (Thomas)

The epistemic domain and corresponding research logics (Goldman, 1995) appeared to be main triggers within the professional socialization processes of the ECAs. Nora referred to "epistemological and theoretical aspects and existing knowledge on the topic under scrutiny, which build the basis for [her] research approaches". More specifically, Emma emphasized the quantitative paradigm, which guided her epistemological convictions:

In my country, our field is strongly empirically driven. Without large sample sizes, complex statistical analysis, and checks of validity, reliability, and objectivity, the results have little value to the community. […] We knew from the beginning that qualitative interviews would follow the quantitative data collection, but to be honest I didn't spend much time considering this. For me, these would only (if at all) substantiate the results from the first (quantitative) data collection.

For the ECAs, research had a strong scholarly character, which includes being rigorous and methodological as well as being situated within a theoretical and conceptual tradition (Bills, 2004). However, they also recognized the increasing importance of having an impact beyond academia, as Pablo pointed out: "I believe that I have a fairly broad and modern version of the true meaning of $R + D + I$ [research, development, and innovation], where publication is not the main objective, but rather an effective transfer to society". Not only appeared there to be consensus between the ECAs on their understanding of the nature of research, in the sense "that researchers are framed by the same idea of what research is" (William), but also that this common understanding is a prerequisite for conducting the IRP successfully, as "comparative research is mostly reliable when the methods are as similar as possible". (Nora)

4.2. The conflicts evolve: different institutional logics in the affiliated HEIs

The set framework of the IRP and its multifaceted nature comprising a group of 19 researchers from nine different HEIs (ranging from research-intensive to non-research-intensive) and countries revealed differences pertaining to the epistemic and organizational domains between the ECAs and senior researchers. Nora observed that "in the [IRP], there are very practical sport management researchers and some who work more scholarly", whereby as mentioned above, Nora regarded a scholarly logic legitimate in her HEI. However, researchers are not per se socialized into particular research traditions, especially if their field is characterized by ambiguity and fragmentation, as sport management is (Chalip, 2006; Dowling, 2018). They might rather get socialized more specifically into the research traditions that prevail within a particular HEI. Therefore, one research logic might be legitimate in one HEI and be illegitimate in another (Åkerlind, 2008).

The formal agreement of the IRP stipulated that after a quantitative data collection phase, another qualitative one would follow, which exerted coercive pressures and caused inner conflict, as exemplified with Emma. Dominated by her "quantitative upbringing", she struggled to find the motivation to familiarize herself with the largely disregarded qualitative research paradigm in her field (Symon et al., 2008). Being caught in the multiple demands of teaching, research, and service in the home institution and the project, it was not only a struggle to learn about and understand the new epistemology, but to succeed in a short time:

I was finishing up the transcriptions of my interviews. […] By now it was February. I had one month left to analyze the data, interpret the

findings, and write the report. […] I thought I knew what I was doing. But I was so caught up in my quantitative paradigm, I couldn't dig deeper into the material. (Emma)

Furthermore, the characteristics and professional backgrounds of the ECAs differed. Peter, who was in a dual role of researcher and IRP project manager, referred to different understandings of meeting deadlines or participation in project-related discussions as challenging. The generation gap as well as the power differential between junior and senior researchers, which is widely reported in the literature (e.g. Borenstein & Shamoo, 2015, Bosanquet, Mailey, Matthews & Lodge, 2017), strongly influenced these processes as well as the research agenda: "I realized how much the different status of the researchers (e.g. seniority) in terms of culture, gender, age, and field of academic interest impacted group dynamics and working together". (Thomas)

Although the institutional project design of the IRP set out clear goals and responsibilities within a formal agreement between the partners and the EU as funding institution, there appeared to be individual goals that partners pursued, which could be regarded as decoupling of individual agency from institutional orders. Peter concluded that" […] the strength of the project in the intercultural diversity is also a challenge and an obstacle, since the many different interests work against the common goal".

4.3. The conflicts escalate: different institutional logics in the IRP

As a response to these challenges, it was clear to the ECAs that intercultural understanding, leadership, coordination, and communication of a clear structure would be critical success factors within the IRP, which pertain to "[…] the project management's ability to structure the tasks in a meaningful way so that all involved partners feel a sense of ownership of the output" (Peter). In order to create ownership, it was crucial to find the right balance between motivating the partners to achieve a common goal while leaving room for the pursuit of individual goals. The associated power struggles and negotiations exacerbated leading and managing the project, as Peter explained "[…] I have worked as a researcher and project manager together with a colleague. This dual role has created an overview as well as frustrations […]". The "over-democratic approach" (Nora) resulted in inefficiencies and frustrations, which became apparent with the project partners as well, since they were, for example, uncertain about how to structure the required project documentations. Furthermore, the IRP group failed to agree on clearly defined project goals, since interests and commitment between the partners further diverged as to whether to focus on a comparative study at European level or independent studies at national level. Nora realized that more emphasis seemed to be placed on individual studies, which collided with her initial expectation that the overall project goal would necessitate a comparative study: "However, the nine countries involved have different approaches. I learned that comparing data was not the highest priority, but rather the relevance of suitable methods for the individual countries was".

The most important decisions within the IRP were made in transnational project meetings, which escalated the ECAs' conflicts, since they witnessed a variety of *bad practices*, which are increasingly discussed in the literature (e.g. Shrum, Chompalov & Genuth, 2001). Debates around data collection procedures, sample, and data analysis was very present in the researcher group" (Nora) and reveals controversies about research design and conduct, which would later on lead to issues of validity and reliability of data, as William illustrated: "From similar sets of data, I read quite different results". Disputes about intellectual property, i.e. whether and to what extent the partners could use the data from the other countries strongly influenced publication practices. William noticed: "I expected the data and findings to benefit all partners… [but]… I was surprised to learn that not all partners were willing to share the results".

William rhetorically asked: "Maybe it is not a money issue, but a

question of information as a means to power. If you share the information, do you put yourself in a challenging position?" These issues can generate considerable conflict in inter-institutional research projects such as IRPs. These conflicts not only occurred on the factual level of the IRP but extended to the interpersonal level with some research participants undermining team morale. William wonders whether "the new public management approach to academia takes control […] and common sense while good relations to colleagues are pushed to the background". However, questions pertaining to authorship were the most controversial source of conflict, as Thomas explained: "Conflicts emerged on different views on how to disseminate results and around questions of authorship". The main authorship issues included the selection of designated researchers to write the final project report and the difficulty of assigning proper authorship credit to each IRP member, which William illustrated: "All partners could comment on the work but only two partners were the authors. One partner wanted everybody to be stated as authors". Issues of intellectual property and authorship relate to normative pressures and the dominant institutional logics of academia.

A good relationship between the project participants, primarily between senior researchers and the ECAs would enhance the learning experience, which was the main motivation for ECAs to partake in the IRP. However, variances in commitment of researchers caused friction as Thomas explained:

> The pace and progress were slow. Not all people seemed to be equally interested to participate and work on the overall success of the project (being on the phone or computer rather than actively discussing and making suggestions, not being available for the entire time of the meetings as scheduled).

The reflections by Thomas and William show that the conflicting logics and behaviors prevailing in IRPs are challenges that academics encounter in their professional life.

4.4. Lessons learned: ECAs' potential to co-shape the rules of the games

Participating in the IRP was an important experience for the ECAs. Based on their perceptions of institutional logics, in particular of the *right* way of doing research, in the organizational field of sport management academia and more specifically in their affiliated HEIs, the project experiences stimulated reflection processes as well as specific purposive actions, which, based on the concept of institutional work, have the potential to positively impact their professional identity development. The tensions and struggles with conforming to institutional logics experienced in the IRP impacted the way ECAs think about academia and brought about solutions to their conflicts in the sense of reflecting on the degree of rigor of the rules, norms, belief systems, structures, and processes engrained in dominant logics (Oliver, 1991) by maintaining, disrupting, and creating institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The impact within our sample on the perception of academia resulted to be stronger on the doctoral students than the other ECAs. This finding was expected as the former have been declared to continue learning the rules of the game. Notwithstanding, participating in the IRP impacted the professional identity development of all ECAs involved, indicating both proximity and diversity within the small sample. We understand this to be one of the main strengths of our autoethnographic approach, combining diverse individual experiences as pieces to a common puzzle.

Theoretical, conceptual and methodological inaccuracies complemented by diverging positions on intellectual property and authorship not only impeded the dissemination strategy of the project results but also publications, which the ECAs were hoping to realize. The lack of rigorous theoretical, conceptual and methodological underpinnings as well as representative sample sizes regarded as legitimate present serious barriers for career advancement given the need of being accepted for research publication in (prestigious) academic outlets.

These shortcomings contrasted strongly with the research logics of the ECAs, which led them to critically reflect on the IRP as a rigorous academic project, as Pablo concluded: "The language and procedures required in the application process and justification of this type of [European] project is totally outside the academic language and complicates the efficient use of resources needed for the investigation". This critical reflection on the IRP also affected the ECAs' stance on the credibility of EU-funded project outcomes in the realm of the Erasmus+ program more widely, as Thomas constituted:

> After having been involved in [the IRP] and experiencing especially the meeting and discussion culture, and the work attitude of some researchers in the project, my view on EU project reports has changed. Assuming that most projects would have been conducted in a similar way […] then I would treat the results and implications with caution. […] Also, I believe now that these reports and projects might not have this strong influence in shaping decisions in member states as I believed when I was an undergraduate student.

Despite questioning the academic rigor of the IRP, the ECAs maintained it as a legitimate institutional arrangement, since it provided a platform and empowered them to create an "invisible college" (Wagner, 2008) as a research network of primarily younger researchers "from different nationalities and cultures who think, see and analyze matters from their perspective" (William) and with "which [they] may want to work in one way or another in the future, such as teacher exchange or working on a common article" (Thomas), both within and outside their academic focus areas as well as their institutional affiliations. ECAs can take advantage of such IRPs, since the network structure that they create enables them to cooperate in and coordinate avenues for developing their own research agenda, aimed at producing new knowledge, diffusing knowledge to others, and being influential in the organizational field (e.g. Lazer & Friedman, 2007), as William highlighted: "From here a reflective knowledge sharing evolves". In fact, the ECAs seized on first opportunities to establish their "invisible college", as Thomas pointed out: "[William] has already been in [Germany] for three days of teaching and the idea of writing this collective biography of experiences in the project is a good example".

If maintained and cultivated, the newly created bonds have great potential to influence existing institutional logics within their affiliated HEIs and in the organizational field of sport management academia as well, since they can increase labor mobility of students and research and create research clusters through (international) institutional cooperation. Moreover, joint publications and conference presentations increase the ECAs' visibility within the academic field and, more widely, their social capital, which can provide access to significant feedback mechanisms, reinforcing early leads with funding and offers of co-authorship. Therefore, the creation of the network strongly impacted the professional identity development of the ECAs and may greatly influence their career paths towards "a new generation of scientific leaders" (Hird & Pfotenhauer, 2017, p. 569), as Pablo concluded: "Once an initiative successfully ends, ideas are born to create five new ones, it is incredible".

The ECAs had "positive and negative experiences about European innovation systems" (Pablo), which impacted the way they think about academia, and thus their professional identity. Their stories depicted idiosyncrasies that caused change for every individual, and through a process of reflection in their collective biography, their memories became one "valuable experience" (Thomas) and an "important milestone" (Pablo). Emma illustrated: "Looking back, it was the best thing that could have happened to me in this early stage of my academic career". This collective memory "jump-started" some of their career decisions already and promises to arouse further experiences on their paths towards a new generation of academics that challenges dominant logics in the organizational field of sport management academia.

The ECAs realized that the way of doing research they perceived to be right when entering the IRP is not *the only* true way to create knowledge. Nora concluded that her perception of the various facets

prevailing in academia was confirmed by the participation in the IRP: "[…] I learned that there are many different approaches to research". It is well documented in the literature (e.g. Åkerlind, 2008; Bills, 2004; Bozeman, Gaughan, Youtie, Slade & Rimes, 2016; Brew, 2001; Kiley & Mullins, 2005) that academics have different intentions to engage in research collaborations and conduct research in general, ranging from fulfilling academic requirements (e.g. completing a project, grant or publication), benefitting themselves (e.g. extending their own career or reputation or personal development) to benefitting others (e.g. extending the research field or achieving social outcomes).

Emma, meanwhile, experienced "a personal paradigm shift", since she found that "the questions [she] had been asking thus far in [her] career need to follow a qualitative approach in order to get behind the *why* rather than the *what*". Furthermore, she concluded to be "more skeptical than before concerning quantitative research".

Not only did Emma shift her perspective on the qualitative research paradigm, but she also presented a vision for challenging the dominant research logic in her HEI and in the organizational field of sport management academia, and being actively involved in creating a new, co-existing, research logic:

> Today I look forward to doing more and better qualitative research. […] Had someone told me a year ago that I would be endorsing qualitative research methods (and promoting them to my students in the form of a master thesis) I would have laughed.

Therefore, the IRP enlightened the ECAs in a sense that they challenged their own perspective on academia in various ways and paved a new way of epistemological thinking, as Nora illustrated: "Self-reflection of my role and approach as researcher has been very interesting for my personal development".

5. Conclusion

In this study, we examined how participation in an IRP can change the way ECAs think about academia. In a collective biography of six ECAs, we showed that while participating in the IRP, ECAs experienced both a shift in perspective as well as a professional socialization process into the institutional logics of sport management academia. The proximity and diversity of the involved ECAs created an intriguing sample based on previous experiences both in personal and academic life. The ECAs who had already completed their doctoral degree seemed less affected by the participation within the IRP, indicating these to be more accustomed to playing by the rules of academia.

However, we need to consider certain limitations for our study. The method chosen does not allow to generalize about the findings of our study. It might be possible that ECAs from different HEIs and countries participating in other EU-funded IRPs as well as other types of IRPs in the organizational field of sport management academia and beyond make different experiences. Despite these limitations, we can conclude that the themes found in our study regarding the ways of thinking about academia appear not only specific to the ECAs participating in an IRP or ECAs in the developing organizational field of sport management academia. These themes also seem to occur across other developing and established academic disciplines in the social sciences and humanities as well as in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), as studies across disciplines and those focused on specific disciplines have shown (e.g. Åkerlind, 2008). However, more research about ECAs perceptions of research and professional identity development, especially in developing academic fields or disciplines, such as sport management, is needed. In particular, IRPs as a significant experience in the development of ECAs is an under-researched area concerning research collaborations. Future research could therefore build on our results using different qualitative methods, e.g. semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions to elicit more diverse perspectives and impulses of how the participation in IRPs influences ECAs' perspectives on research and their career development. It is also worthwhile to consider different types and scopes of IRPs, since variation in institutional designs, in terms of infrastructure, funding, staffing and duration could have an impact on ECA's thinking about research and professional identity development.

Our study presents important implications for both ECAs and for those who are supportive of and have an interest in the ECAs' professional identity development, such as doctoral supervisors or, more broadly, educators. Academics of the future across fields and disciplines will need a broader set of transferable skills to contribute to the increasingly varied activities of their academic employers; beyond traditional qualification outcomes, such as research training and publishing (McKay & Monk, 2017). We believe that supporting doctoral students in the participation within an IRP is beneficial for both institutions and doctoral students. In doing so, institutions and educators can foster doctoral students' learning experiences of playing the game according to the institutionalized rules of their specific field. As our study showed, IRPs have great potential to contribute to ECAs' professional identity development and provide ECAs a platform to build their professional network. We therefore suggest that encouraging ECAs to participate in IRPs and recognizing their achievements in appropriate ways is a promising avenue for educators to shape confident and critical academics for the future.

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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