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Collaging the (Dis)*illusio* of Being International Early Career Women in Physical Education and Sport Sciences/Kinesiology

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ABSTRACT

The uncertainties surrounding the neoliberal labor market intersecting with many challenges lead us to try our best in understanding academia, specifically as women early career scholars in physical education and sport sciences/kinesiology. Unpacking academia, framed under the concept of *illusio*, takes time, but we feel we need to understand it fast to be able to remain in "the game." Drawing on Bourdieusian, critical, and feminist frameworks, we aim to expand on why we are in academia and what shapes our experiences. In so doing, we hope to create spaces for dialogue and connection since we are not alone navigating these challenges, and further, we aim to contribute to social change. We use the concept of collage as a metaphor and claim (and complaint) to articulate our co-autoethnographic paper and as a research method to summarize reflexive processes for data generation from the singular to the plural.

KEYWORDS

Bourdieu; feminism; academia; internationalization; early career scholars

> *Collage involves celebrating these diverse fragments brought together in the research and the edges, messiness, and spaces in-between the fragments which are just as important as when the patches fit together neatly. Noting what certain methods cannot tell you can be as interesting as what they can. (Freeman, 2020, p. 335)*

Our mood board: starting point for creating a collage

It is May 2024, and we find ourselves in a cozy shared apartment we have rented in Jyväskylä (Finland) to attend the AIESEP[1] Conference. For *the first* time since we began our academic journeys, we didn't have to pay for the conference registration fees on our own – our universities did. What a relief! Even more special is that this is our first in-person encounter, though our connection spans years and previous countless online conversations. As we settle into the apartment, the excitement is palpable. We begin chatting and catching up, marveling at how much has happened since we defended our PhD theses around 2 years ago. Our conversation revolves around the difficulties of pursuing an academic career in Spain, the neoliberal practices permeating today's universities and the physical education

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and sport sciences/kinesiology (PESSK)[2] field, the challenges we face as women in our internationalization experiences, and the sacrifices we have made to get "this far." Maybe we have not "come this far" for others, but for us, having a position at an international university is something we never even dreamed of. We discuss what it takes to learn "the rules of the game," but also reflect on how fortunate we are to be able to live this experience, to "play this game," and how much it enriches us. In our discussion, we realize that, despite the challenges, we are happy in our respective jobs and agree that we want to stay in academia. Is it ambition, addiction to the game, *illusio* at play?

Despite ongoing efforts to promote diversity, inclusion, and social responsibility within higher education, academic spaces continue to be shaped by toxic cultures and entrenched systems of privilege (Tietjen-Smith, 2020). These environments are often sustained by leaders and followers, whether through active complicity or passive acceptance, who allow inequities and harmful dynamics to persist. Tietjen-Smith (2020) argues that, as a collective, we are not doing enough to challenge these structures, calling for "*greater advocacy over apathy*" (p. 144). Scholars such as Santos et al. (2024) have emphasized the importance of early-career researchers engaging in critical reflection on their own positionality and their role within these power structures. Similarly, Brusseau (2025) urges academics to reflect not only on personal impact but also on how institutional cultures and values shape the wider field, recognizing that the ethos of academia today will influence its future direction.

In response to their call for action, this work shares the reflections of three international early-career women scholars, offering a lens through which to understand how structural issues manifest in everyday academic life. By doing so, we aim to help others recognize their own experiences and question the systems they are part of. At the same time, we want to offer insights to those scholars who do not share our background – whether because they are at different career stages, come from different contexts, or other reasons – so they might understand, or have a sense of, other ways of beginning an academic journey. We hope this reflection adds to earlier women's work (e.g., Varea et al., 2021) and encourages more people to think critically about academic life, so we do not end up reproducing the very systems we aim to transform.

Therefore, this work seeks to explore the question of *why* we choose to remain in the academic game. To approach it, we draw on the Bourdieusian concept of *illusio* as the belief in the value of what we are pursuing through active doing. This approach finds justification in our backgrounds and intersectional lacks in our lives, as will be seen later in the paper, and explains why we remain invested in academia as a perpetual game made of economies of intensity, motivation, and purpose (Threadgold, 2020). Our particular journeys and reflections, along with the above-mentioned theory, offer a unique contribution to criticizing and comprehending the ethos of today's academia (Brusseau, 2025). However, the answer is not straightforward, as emotions and intimate thoughts are not easily translated into written words, especially when communicating in a language that is not one's mother tongue. Instead, our response is composed of multiple fragments, pieces, and layers, which are clipped and merged, background and foreground, integrated into a complex composition. For this reason, we have chosen to illustrate our answering process through collages not only as a metaphor and claim (and complaint) but also as a research method. This approach enables us to generate data by summarizing our shared reflexive processes while

inviting open-ended interpretations (Springgay et al., 2005). In this context, "the collage" operates through a metonymic logic, where meaning is not directly stated but evoked through partial, relational, and displaced visual elements. In this sense, the artwork becomes a space of interpretive ambiguity and affective resonance, rather than a fixed or linear narrative (Springgay et al., 2005).

To expand on why we are in academia and what shapes our experiences, we recalled our realities under a critical feminist lens and engaged with Bourdieusian[3] concepts. We focus mainly on *illusio*, but also feel the need to bring the theory of practice into play as its elements are directly related to what we go through when developing the feeling for the game, as integrated concepts. Specifically, there is the academic *field* at the center, with its peculiar *habitus* given by the ingrained dispositions and practices that shape scholars' performativity, requiring different *capitals* from them. Before presenting our collages as-method-to-share a summary of experiences, feelings, memories, and emotions, we will link our approach to the theoretical framework we are adopting. We present the theory of practice and *illusio* under a critical feminist standpoint, highlighting how our experience in academia is shaped in patriarchal neoliberal terms (McRobbie, 2015).

Conceptualizing the layout: theory of practice and illusio

Pierre Bourdieu explored many social concepts that are, to date, useful to understand educational structures like academia. Bourdieu's (1972) theory of practice comprises the concepts of habitus, capital, and field, which are all present when unpacking *illusio* in the academic field. For instance, habitus is a set of dispositions and practices cultivated, embodied, and performed among academics which shape behaviors and expectations in and for the environment (Mezzaroba & Bassani, 2022). The habitus is given by the internalization of schemas perpetuated by structures that conform specific systems (Thiry-Cherques, 2006), which are expected to be learnt by early-career scholars (ECS). It "indicates the incorporated disposition, almost postural of an agent in action [. . .] the mental structures through which they apprehend the social world" (Bourdieu, 2004a, p. 158). In practice, it can be verified, for example, in the way of asking a question, which contains an impressive amount of theory behind often being both scary and annoying.

Capital, in turn, is a "possession" that may be material or not. Bourdieu (1986) initially named three forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural; with other classifications following in the literature, such as aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010) or erotic capital (Hakim, 2010). To succeed in academia, specific valued capitals are required, such cultural and social capitals, but also others that are specific for the PESSK field with its body of knowledge embraced as authority by a scientific community led especially in English. Thus, knowledge capital and language capital, for example, are at play in academia. Field, in turn, is a social place where agents or groups move in a hierarchical logic of power, positioning themselves (Bourdieu, 2001). Fields are microsystems with specific rules working in parallel in macrosystems. As Bourdieu (2004b, p. 20) defines it, field is

> the universe in which the agents and institutions that produce, reproduce or disseminate art, literature or science are inserted. [. . .] The notion of field is there to designate this relatively autonomous space, this microcosm endowed with its own laws.

The three concepts (i.e., habitus, capital, and field) together give us the theory of practice, as what people do in a specific field, performing in specific ways, according to the expected habitus for such a field and holding the required capitals to be able to perform in such field (Bourdieu, 2012). In academia, a specific habitus is expected from or induced among scholars (Collyer, 2015). They seek to belong to a field of high intellectual proficiency, which places them accordingly. Their literacy to walk and escalate the steps of promotion in the field considers many factors and abilities; nevertheless, different hold capitals tend to contribute to progress. The specification goes forward considering specific fields: in the PESSK area, broadly speaking, habitus tends to consider bodily dispositions, and an important investment in a variety of conceptions for body capital are usually in place (e.g., Brown, 1999; Brown & Jennings, 2013).

To link theory of practice with the *illusio* concept, we find in Bourdieu's (1984) social reproduction theory a connection, specifically using our lived experiences pre-academia as a strong motivation to want to enter this field. Following Bourdieu, we end up reproducing what we go through (also due to a lack of things that we dream of and get caught by when in contact with), be it through formal or informal teachings. In the PESSK area is a great need of social justice awareness, requiring us to dismantle reproduction perpetuation (Azzarito et al., 2016). As advocators for social change and criticizing neoliberal approaches that blame those unprivileged or not able to reach given standards for success (McRobbie, 2015), while striving for people's awareness and enlightenment through our daily work as ECS, we also reflect on the inequalities that we end up contributing to maintain in society. However, we argue that despite the contradiction, being absent from "the game," as the *illusio*'s mechanism, would be worse. *Illusio*

> is the notion of being and constituting oneself in the game, "playing the game," in order to legitimize these practices and interests, at the same time that it capitalizes on this field in the exchanges it makes happen. *Illusio* is a libido, an interest that provides an enormous "pleasure of playing" within the context of a field according to the habitus already incorporated. Is the *illusio* itself that allows the maintenance of the field to strengthen and gain autonomy, aiming at its consolidation and legitimacy, because when the symbolic power of a certain group is expanded, that of the field is expanded as well (Mezzaroba & Bassani, 2022, p. 4).

We believe that playing the game is worth it – and in the "belief" may reside our naivete, our seek for some meaning in life and some success. *Illusio* is in the core of this: we are happy, maybe even grateful to be allowed to play a game that feeds itself back by using our efforts, energy, ideas, and sometimes a somewhat irrational competition.

Bourdieu's conceptualization of *illusio*, is related to the principle of perception, interest in the game and investment (Bourdieu, 1995). A principle of perception means that values conveyed within the field are perceived differently outside it, and such perception informs the objects and values of a field that are constituted as valuable, as well as its main games and tasks. The interest in the game reads as a principle of adhesion and normative attachment in which agents accept following the rules, playing accordingly to the values in force (conforming to the local habitus), thus assuming the legality of fields' prescriptions. The principle of investment or inversion refers to the commitment agents make to material, symbolic and emotional strategies to achieve the goals and values established by the field. With that, there is in place an adjustment of agents' behaviors and performances to the emotional regimes established in the field and culminating in *the illusio*.

This said, we are aware that there are flaws to our more or less long-term pursuit of an academic career. Regardless, we are here, willing to face and overcome challenges. But we are also questioning ourselves and critically reflecting on our choices and assumptions, responsible teaching, and social demands, especially for women ECS, through neoliberalism and precarity. This will become more evident as we report some of our lived experiences later, but we do live under strong demands as women ECS who need to comply with high standards, almost reaching perfection, to be able to have a job, and perhaps, someday, a tenured position. The precarity of jobs in the gig economy and prevailing uncertainty era (Kirk, 2020) leads us to submit to jobs that possibly would not be our first choice. And we surrender all to them, as it will be shown, working in an intensive continuous dynamic under the fear that, if we fail, we are the only ones responsible for that, as imperfect women (McRobbie, 2015). We will delve into our previous expectations of what academia is for each of us (or was, since there is a perpetual reformulation going on), exploring meaning that may help people to navigate the context. Before doing so, we will present the process of composing our pieces of the collage.

Clipping, cutting, and tearing the pieces: the co/autoethnographic assemblage

> [P]atriarchal reasoning goes all the way down, to the letter, to the bone. I had to find ways not to reproduce its grammar in what I said, in what I wrote; in what I did, in who I was (Ahmed, 2017, p. 4)

Sara Ahmed reflects on the pervasive power of patriarchy in all structures surrounding us. She reminds us of the importance of being mindful of our actions and thoughts to challenge the status quo. We decided to employ a co-autoethnographic (Taylor & Coia, 2019) methodology to explore and understand our journeys in academia, specifically in the physical education/kinesiology area, as three international ECS women. We chose co-autoethnography as a feminist research methodology that extends autoethnography from the singular to the plural (Taylor & Coia, 2019). This methodology empathizes that knowledge is *co*-constructed through relationships and allows us to investigate the selves within larger cultural and social contexts, such as academia in the specifics of our area of knowledge. In so doing, co-autoethnography queers research by blurring binary frames (e.g., body–mind, personal–professional), including everyday life experiences (Coia & Taylor, 2013), and valuing emotions as integral parts of knowledge (Jaggar, 1989). It is a way to challenge patriarchal and hegemonic notions of research.

Moreover, these approaches are particularly valuable when working with and within marginalized communities (i.e., ECS). They offer a way of engaging with lived experiences that surpasses the surface-level understanding often produced by traditional research methods, allowing for individuals to reclaim authorship over their own narratives, resisting dominant representations, and contributing to more inclusive forms of knowledge (Ahmed, 2012). By affirming lived experience as legitimate and powerful, such approaches can support individuals and communities in their efforts to challenge inequality and push for social change (hooks, 1994).

Data generation within co-autoethnographies includes dialogs, discussions, and stories (Taylor & Coia, 2019). For us, dialogue and discussions started with unplanned opportunities that emerged as *accidental moments* or *revelatory moments* (Fujii, 2015), such as the

interaction in Finland pointed out at the beginning of our text. Echoing Museus and Sasaki (2022), it was these daily struggles with neoliberal structures and many dialogs that informed our first research stages. Discussions were then translated into individual jottings to remind us of such moments (Emerson et al., 2011). This was followed by a structured plan of meetings (a total of seven through 6 months), where we shared our stories, emotions, and thoughts concerning our experiences in academia. These meetings were recorded and transcribed (a total of 322 pages). To enhance the collective understanding of our stories, we discussed and agreed on generating individual artifacts as collages (de Rijke, 2024; Vacchelli, 2018). In this regard, each of us created an individual collage answering the questions: "As an early career international woman who got a PhD in PESSK area from Spain: (a) What is academia for you? (b) Why are you in academia?" After creating each collage, we briefly described them using written words and shared them through oral presentation/explanation in recorded online meetings.

During these meetings, we used the artifacts created (collages) to prompt conversations and discussions, re-living and re-imagining our biographies (Taylor & Coia, 2019), generating data through processes of elicitation and reflexivity. Therefore, the artifacts, narratives, memories, and emotions evoked were used to generate a shared understanding of our journeys through our bodies (Chadwick, 2017). In this way, collage-making represents for us an embodied experience that permits understanding that "how we feel, how we perceive, how we relate to our own bodies and the place they have in the order of things – is contextual, gendered, relational, historically and culturally situated" (Vacchelli, 2018, p. 173). Taken further, collage creation gave us a new language through which to make sense of our experiences and feelings (de Rijke, 2024). It became a process in which research is understood as a lived endeavor, unfolding through the contiguous interaction and movement between art and graphy (Springgay et al., 2005). Our decision to use collage was also an attempt to queer data generation methods, transcending dichotomies and finding ways not to reproduce patriarchy in, following Ahmed's quote, "what we wrote," "what we did," and, hopefully, "who we are" –despite being women raised in patriarchal contexts/societies.

The data analysis was developed using the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). We began by individually engaging with the data (e.g., recorded meetings, jottings) using both descriptive and conceptual coding. Initial codes included descriptive terms such as *feeling like an impostor*, *language barriers*, and *missing home*, as well as more conceptual codes like *marketization of knowledge* and *precarity*. These codes were then grouped and discussed collaboratively to identify areas of convergence and tension. For example, the recurring code *missing home* intersected with *perpetual mobility* and *migration* to spark discussions around internationalization and displacement. Next, each of us individually reviewed and refined the preliminary themes (e.g., constant migrant status). Afterward, we met again to present these revised themes and further discuss areas of agreement and divergence, actively exploring the relationships between them. At this stage, we drew on the theory of practice and the dimensions of *illusio*, bringing a deductive lens to our analysis. For instance, the preliminary theme "*constant migrant status*" evolved into "*Perpetual outsider: migrant status in the field, striving to belong*". Finally, we integrated relevant literature and theoretical perspectives (e.g., feminist and critical work) to better situate our data within broader academic structures. As a result of this process, we identified three central themes that

frame our shared reflection, which will be addressed below. Before presenting them, and using a "collage-making language," we will share the background of our composition, encompassing our context and positionalities.

The background composition

We earned our PhDs at different Spanish universities and share a passion for critical studies and frames in PESSK but have completely different life stories.

A PhD journey in the Spanish system

To pursue a doctoral program in Spain, candidates must first complete a bachelor's and a master's degree, or the equivalent European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), as a prerequisite. Following this, they must formally enroll in a doctoral program, which has a minimum duration of 3 years and a maximum of five. According to the latest University Student Statistics Report, prepared by the Integrated University Information System (SIU) and funded by Spain's Ministry of Universities, during the 2022–2023 academic year 92,382 people were enrolled in doctoral programs. Of these, 28.7% were international students, with over half coming from Latin America and the Caribbean. Despite the big numbers, around 80% of doctoral candidates in Spain abandon their studies before completing their dissertation (Castelló et al., 2017), a phenomenon that is also prevalent internationally (Wollast et al., 2018). The literature identifies the following factors contributing to doctoral dropout: issues related to the program itself, problems with the research group or faculty, supervision challenges, and financial or personal difficulties (Litalien & Guay, 2015).

In the same 2022–2023 period, public funding for doctoral studies, offered by the Ministry, included 914 scholarships. This means that only 0.99% of all enrolled doctoral students had access to the primary source of funding in Spain: the predoctoral contract under the University Faculty Training program (*Formación del Profesorado Universitario* – FPU). By law, the minimum salary for any predoctoral researcher in Spain is 18,180.41€ in the first and second years, 19,479.01€ in the third year, and 24,348.76€ in the final year with limited variations above this amount. However, it can take up to a year to secure this funding, which means that most doctoral candidates in Spain begin their first year without financial support, as highlighted by local newspapers (Paul Alemany in El País, December 15, 2023).

According to data from the SIU's Statistical Note on Doctoral Theses for 2022, 11,259 people successfully defended their dissertations in Spain that year. After completing their viva, two main career paths are available: postdoctoral contracts or entry-level academic positions as *Ayudante Doctor* (the most junior academic position for doctoral graduates within the Spanish university system). National postdoctoral programs offer an average of 600 positions each, with some programs requiring 2 years of international experience or the completion of a PhD at least 2 years before the call. Additionally, there are regional and university-level programs that provide about 100 more positions each year, along with opportunities to work on European projects under the supervision of a Principal Investigator. In total, around 800 public postdoctoral positions are available annually.

For entry-level academic positions as Assistant Professor, there are no official statistics available, as these openings are published in the official bulletins of each university, where the specific requirements and academic fields are detailed. However, the government

admitted the need for more funding to support Assistant Professor roles and has promised 3,400 positions starting in 2024 (Ministry of Science and Innovation, 2024). This would ensure that around 30% of ECS would be eligible for a job at a Spanish university. Yet, it is not just the number of jobs offered but also the intense competition which also hinders the incorporation of ECS into the Spanish academic system. Contextualizing the regions of the authors, only two positions have been advertised in the past 3 years in the city where one of the authors was based. In most cases, these positions are awarded by individuals who hold qualifications equivalent to or above Associate Professor.

Considering the low percentage of opportunities available for those who complete their doctoral studies to secure a research or academic position in Spain through a public call based on their qualifications, common pathways include leaving academia, relying on funding from a Principal Investigator, transitioning to the private sector, or relocating abroad to further their careers. This is our case: women who eagerly contribute to international universities not because we undervalue local opportunities, but rather because we could not find opportunities to contribute locally. As such, we have been constantly pushing against glass ceilings, as shown in the next section.

Our (brief) life stories

Fabiana. I identify as a cisgender woman born in an indigenous village in the countryside of South Brazil. I spent my childhood on a farm with my sisters and semi-illiterate parents, who got divorced when I was 10 years old. After my parents' divorce, we (my mom, sisters, and I) moved off the farm and struggled even harder than before financially. I studied my entire life in public schools, and my parents were not concerned about my progress, with my mom often demanding that I interrupt my homework to help her make food to sell to generate income for the house. I was ashamed of that, which stopped when I was 14 to work as an employee of my father. My payment for 20 weekly hours of work would allow me only to pay for my karate training. Without my father knowing I was applying to it, at 17 I was approved to take an undergraduate degree in a public university, which in Brazil are the best universities and to which you pay no fees at all. It is indeed free quality education but was far from the countryside. So, I left the countryside and my family to pursue education. After a master's degree, I could not continue my education due to life hardships; to come back to academia and be able to complete my PhD abroad, in Spain, and my dream of learning languages, without scholarships I needed to sell the small apartment I had back in Brazil. Thus, my inversion in the persecution of a non-violent/civilized/different life from what I have had was absolute. I invested everything, relying on a perception of academia as a respectful place, as much as intellectually sophisticated, and able to provide a basically good income. By recalling my lived experiences, I easily know how it feels when things are wrong, and I criticize them and fight for social justice. On the other hand, for *desperately* wanting to avoid a scenario like that known by me from an early age, I do my best and work like a horse to be able to remain in *better* places.

Carmen. I am a cis-woman born in a small town in Murcia. Although I am the first PhD in my family, I was fortunate to have parents who were able to pursue higher education (my mother studied law, and my father studied nursing). Our income came from my parents' hard work rather than inherited wealth, but it was more than enough to enjoy the privilege of a comfortable life and to choose, free from financial pressure, "which dream I wanted to pursue." I was born into a generation that believed education would secure a better life for

their children, so education was always a priority in our home. Whenever I expressed a cultural or educational interest, my family made every effort to support it, whether through our finances or through scholarships, which allowed me to have experiences such as international exchanges (Erasmus), research stays (Erasmus+), and completing my PhD (FPU). Science has always been a part of my life, but outside academia, you often think of it as reserved for those studying recognized scientific disciplines. When I entered university to study sports sciences and was selected for an internship within the pedagogy research group, I discovered science as a tool for the betterment of humanity and social sciences, becoming captivated by the *illusio* of changing the world through "that" science. However, despite infusing my personal touch, the research I conducted until completing my doctorate was largely guided by the context I was in and a dependence on the opinions of experienced colleagues, which did not always align with my beliefs. It was only when I embarked on this new adventure that I encountered a different kind of academia, where I was challenged to test my beliefs, assess my role in our research field, and experience the freedom (and fear) of someone charting her own path, believing she can create something meaningful.

Marina. I am a cis-woman born in Catalonia, yet my roots trace back to my grandparents who migrated from other Spanish regions to Barcelona in search of better economic opportunities, higher living standards, and the promise of a more prosperous future. I grew up in a working-class family with no higher education. I acknowledge, however, that I have enjoyed the privileges associated with a stable economic situation. This aspect, among other things, has allowed me to study without worries and to aspire and "dream big." For me, pursuing a PhD was a great achievement, and it was for my family too, even though they still don't quite understand what it entails or what I do. Since I was young, I've been called the "defender of lost causes," a characteristic that has accompanied me throughout my life. Perhaps this is why, when I decided to embark on my doctoral thesis (which was funded with a predoctoral fellowship), I was determined to conduct research within transformative and feminist paradigms, aiming for social transformation, no matter how small. This decision, however, came with significant challenges, especially being in a department where my work was undervalued because they primarily prioritize positivist research and "hard sciences." Currently, I find myself in a *professional* situation I never even dared to dream of: working outside Spain in one of the most recognized departments in my field, alongside exceptional professionals and human beings, while far from home (culturally and personally, and this hurts). For the first time, however, I feel valued *at work*. This life journey has undoubtedly shaped – and continues to shape – my experience in academia.

Merging, integrating (and gluing?) the pieces

After conceptualizing the mood board, the layout, and defining the background of our composition, it is time to merge, integrate, and potentially glue the foreground pieces. Given our diverse life stories, the background composition differs slightly for each of us. Therefore, we will first share our provisional (and personal) compositions. Following this, we will explore a final – though still evolving – collage of (our) experiences as ECS, aiming to build a more complete composition by engaging with our theoretical framework and prior research in PESSK.

Provisional compositions[i]

Fabiana. What is academia for me? A dream, a knowledge place, a fair means of life. It has been a dream for a while. As such, it is a space where I can express my/some potential. Even though there are many frustrations, it also impels me to work a lot, thus bringing to reality many projects where I can see my work expressed as meaningful – and this just feels good. I struggled to find a job due to the urgency I had to find one – so all of this made the goal of an academic career so special. It is a place and a space to expand and share knowledge. I used to fall into a somewhat romantic view of education. I am inspired by the idea of making knowledge universal, enlightening minds that could be in darkness. From where I come from, a lack of knowledge will lead to ignorance that aligns with violence. This means that I expect to be among civilized and open-minded people in academia, proposing experiences that lead to broaden views of the world. It is a fair means of life (with dignity), with potential to contribute to society. As for my education view, I always looked for meaningful acting. Even though academic jobs are ultimately jobs, they often affect the world through science production. While I acknowledge all jobs are relevant, I wished I could do something meaningful for people. I also wanted to have living conditions allowing me to dedicate to ideas – because when you need to worry about your hunger or safety, you cannot think well. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Fabiana's collage.

Carmen. When picturing my journey, academia appears as an amalgamation of various elements, with many distinct academies coexisting. In this context, I navigate through different experiences. What has academia meant for me? Pressure. At times, I felt that, due to the privilege of a predoctoral contract, I had no right to holidays, and that working from "vocation" meant forgoing recognized labor rights. Hierarchies. A sense of feeling small and that nothing I did was ever enough. Time lost. Time slips away, often spent validating my "merit" through official certificates, leaving little room for other non-work-related experiences. Inequity. The rules differ depending on where you were born or where

you had the fortune (or misfortune) to study. Sacrifices. I sacrificed my sense of belonging to my place of origin, proximity to family, and leisure time with loved ones. All these aspects define academia. However, it is also a space for personal growth, a constant journey of learning, collaboration, and immersion in diverse cultures. It involves inspiring others and achieving what you once thought impossible. Above all, it fosters a community of men and women, especially women, who understand the effort required to carve out their spaces and build the academia we desire. (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Carmen's collage.

Marina. When I envision academia and my place within it, this is how I see it: I am at the center, juggling the many demands of university life (e.g., research, bureaucracy, loads of e-mails) while striving to maintain my well-being (e.g., self-care, mental health), stay connected with my family, and take care of myself amidst the chaos. Yet, alongside this reality lies my dream – how I imagined academia and how I wish it could be. A place for personal and professional growth, where opportunities are rooted in equity and democracy. A space from which having a voice – because being in academia undoubtedly places you in a position of privilege – to advocate for change, justice, and social action. An environment that not only allows me to thrive but also empowers others to blossom, fostering meaningful connections and generating knowledge that truly matters. And, let's be honest, a stable career that allows us to earn a decent living (I want to buy salmon once a week without needing to look at its price!). Both my reality and my dream exist within a dynamic I see as a "yin and yang." It's a context where precarity, hierarchies, patriarchal structures and inequities coexist with camaraderie (especially sisterhood), continuous learning opportunities, and the hope that academia can truly contribute to improving society and enhancing people's lives. (See Figure 3).

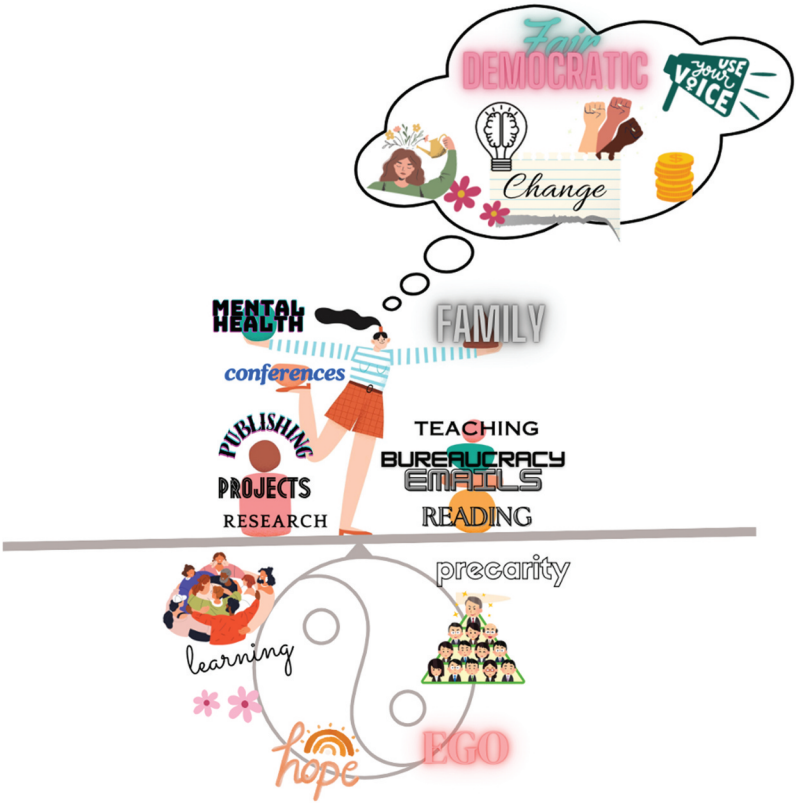

Figure 3. Marina's collage.

The (final?) collage: (our) experiences as ECS in PESSK

In conceptualizing the layout of this collective collage, we drew on Bourdieu's work and identified three key dimensions of *illusio*: the principle of perception, interest in the game, and personal investment (Bourdieu, 1995). These dimensions helped us reflect on how our individual collages – shaped by our life stories and the backgrounds of our compositions – are not only connected to but also shaped by, the theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1972). They are essential in exploring our research question and understanding our experiences as international ECS. What follows is the result of our collective analysis of how these shared and personal experiences have taken shape. In so doing, we present the three central themes of our shared reflection: a) (Dis)illusio as scholars committed to social justice; b) Self- and co-growth: applying the rules of the game (?); and c) Perpetual outsider: migrant status in the field, striving to belong.

(Dis)illusio as scholars committed to social justice

For the three of us, academia has always seemed to be (and somehow continues to be) a dream, an *illusio(n)*. Fabiana described it as *"a dream, a knowledge place, a fair means of life,"* while Marina envisioned it as a space *"to advocate for change, justice, and social action."* Carmen, however, described the pressure of *"having no right to holidays"* and a sense that *"nothing I did was ever enough."* These reflections illustrate the tensions between the

idealism that brought us into academia and the emotional and structural realities we have encountered. The concept of *illusio* helps us make sense of these contradictions. For Bourdieu (1995), *illusio* is a deeply internalized investment in the "game" – the belief that the academic field, despite its costs, is worth playing. But in Spanish, "*ilusión*" also connotes *hope* or *a dream*, not mere fantasy as in English, which is why we occasionally link and play with this word and its concept. This dual meaning further enriches our interpretation of *illusio*, as both a theoretical construct and a deeply personal, emotional stance toward academia. Yet, it speaks to the experience of those feeling outsiders within (Collins, 1986): a space that, while valuable and worth fighting to be part of, still demands huge emotional (and beyond) costs.

This *illusio* is rooted in our perhaps romanticized perception of what education is or should be, considering Latin etymology. Notwithstanding, contemporary (higher) education is increasingly shaped by toxic cultures (Tietjen-Smith, 2020), capitalist values and processes of marketization (Collyer, 2015). As critical scholars committed to social justice, we hold onto the belief that education in general and physical education in particular can, and should, be liberating, a practice of freedom (Freire, 2005; hooks, 1994). This belief, however, has been challenged by the current reality of academia, where learning is controlled and often imbued with a strong pragmatic and instrumental focus, particularly in the area of PESSK (Alfrey et al., 2016; Moreno, 2021).

Our relatively short journey has shown us that academia is built upon a neoliberal system, corroborating that ECS in the PESSK area face challenges in navigating institutional norms, with a huge emotional cost (Alfrey et al., 2016). As such, these structures and its characteristics serve to reinforce the *illusio* around the academic field, where researchers are often assessed based on their "hits" (e.g., the number of publications or citations) rather than the actual substance of their work (Gendron, 2008). In Bourdieu's terms, we develop a (controversial) feeling for the game (Bourdieu, 1995), which means being engaged and absorbed. This, in turn, results in some research becoming sterile and lacking social relevance (Lupu, 2021). Similarly, Darder (2012) critiques how academia legitimizes values, knowledge, and behaviors that align with neoliberal ideologies, while those focused on improving moral and social conditions are devalued, unless they generate revenue or prestige for the institution (Museus & Sasaki, 2022). Thus, education is no longer an ideal but a good to be commercialized – and we do not condemn this approach from a supposedly purist-nationalist perspective, but we argue that high standards (e.g., consciousness, reflexivity, criticality) should still be kept for education to happen.

These critiques align with what appears in our dialogs, collages, and reflections. The desire to engage in meaningful and socially impactful work often clashes with institutional pressures. For example, Carmen's words reveal how our decisions are often shaped by and strained under the weight of systemic expectations.: "the research I conducted until completing my doctorate was largely guided by the context I was in and a dependence on the opinions of experienced colleagues, which did not always align with my beliefs."

The tensions we encountered personally mirror those described in the literature. For our area, the literature confirms that legitimized and valued knowledge is steeped in globalization, marketization, and neoliberalism, while critical, social justice-oriented matters are marginalized (Kirk, 2020). In other words, social justice knowledge is sidelined and left to chance (Hill et al., 2024), reflecting the ongoing need to be inclusive of minorities representing other colors, other financial contexts, other genders and so on (see Varea, 2017). As

Fernández-Balboa (2017) acknowledges, there have always been individuals willing to challenge this tradition in physical education, but those who choose this path often do so from precarious and isolated positions, a fact exacerbated in the case of ECS in PESSK (Enright et al., 2016; Varea, 2017; Varea et al., 2025). This is exemplified by Marina's challenge of doing feminist research during her PhD, which was undervalued in her department "because they primarily prioritise positivist research and 'hard sciences.'"

These experiences lead to feelings of disempowerment, given the discouragement from colleagues and/or supervisors, and then some *dis-illusio* with academia. The three of us, however, have also created connections with colleagues (especially women) alike, which help to sustain us on and in this *illusio*. Yet in our collages, this *dis-illusio* is accompanied by a continued desire to strive – to do meaningful work within, or despite, the system. We see that our choices reflect somewhat *amor fati*, as conceptualized by Bourdieu, as we internalize and accept conditions of our roles that we end up loving by embracing them in a form of resignation (Mead, 2017).

Echoing Lupu (2021, p. 1899), "escaping the illusio of the academic field is thus a continuous struggle to search for and to re-assert the meaning and purpose of our work," as also remarked by Varea et al. (2025). Through our dialogs, collages and reflections, we have come to see that, for us, the purpose of our work is to empower others, inspire change, and advocate for democracy, even if through "small wins" (Weick, 1984). Perhaps, a meaningful purpose of our work is to keep dreaming, with radical hope. As Museus and Sasaki (2022, p. 560) note, "when social justice advocates dare to dream, they momentarily free themselves from the stranglehold of neoliberal technologies and psychological constraints." By embracing this notion, we allow ourselves to imagine a world, and an academia, where our practices and our work are driven by a commitment to social justice and democracy, pushing back against the increasing performativity of academia, which risks fostering superficiality in the knowledge generation, and sometimes re-production (Bourdieu, 1984), process. Nevertheless, we are also aware that neoliberal academia is designed to stifle any resistance. Our critiques as ECS can easily be dismissed as complaints from those who have not yet "succeeded" within the system (Museus & Sasaki, 2022). However, "if everyone is silenced, no one can openly challenge or disrupt the system" (Museus & Sasaki, 2022, p. 556). Here, we have seen how *illusio* operates as a principle of perception, in which "the *illusio* is the condition for the functioning of a game of which it is also, at least partially, the product" (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 228). In so doing, the principle of perception (Bourdieu, 1995) defines what is considered valuable in the academic area of PESSK in combination with the lenses one looks through. *Illusio*, moreover, also has the power to prevent us from questioning the "rules of the game" being played (Lupu, 2021), through generating an interest in the game, a feeling, a taste for it.

Self- and co-growth, applying the rules of the game (?)

For us, entering academia has brought with it a complex set of beliefs about science, knowledge, and societal roles. These beliefs, while some are inspiring, others can be disheartening. Fabiana described it as "a space where I can express my/some potential," despite frustrations and instability. Examining Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* helps us to understand how participating in academia often means not just adhering to its norms but also adjusting to its hierarchies and dynamics. Yet, these adjustments presuppose hysteresis (Bourdieu, 1990), as some disconnection in the interaction between habitus

and field, experienced when entering an unknown world to play an unknown game, considering the previous embodied dispositions (Bourdieu, 2004a) the three of us brought to academia. The invisible force of *illusio* compels us to "play the game" by internalizing its values and expectations; it disciplines and seduces simultaneously. Bourdieu (1995, p. 230) explains that the "collective belief in the game (*illusio*) and in the sacred value of its stakes is simultaneously the precondition and the product of the very functioning of the game." Yet, we ask ourselves: what are the rules of this game, and who defines them?

Throughout our short academic journey, particularly as we reflect on internationalization, we have seen how academia's structures favor those whose backgrounds align closely with its origins, as it has been previously stated by Varea (2017). Carmen highlighted this clearly, saying: "the rules differ depending on where you were born or where you had the fortune (or misfortune) to study." In other words, some individuals have an inherent advantage in understanding and navigating the rules of the game, while others face greater challenges (Varea et al., 2021). Therefore, their success tends to be determined by how easily they can adapt to these established norms, making it clear that the academic environment is shaped by unequal access to resources and opportunities (Ladson-Bilings, 2014). This differential positioning reveals the deeply embedded assumptions of neutrality and meritocracy that obscure structural privilege.

Each of us entered academia with varying levels of capitals, which has shaped our ability to navigate its complex structures. Fabiana exposed "to come back to academia and be able to complete my PhD (. . .) I needed to sell the small apartment I had," while Carmen, who had access to institutional scholarships, expressed feeling "small," as though "nothing I did was ever enough." These disparities are a direct result of the academic "game" being built around centuries-old social and historical forces. For example, in the Western world, the evolution of academic norms alongside the rise of medieval universities and the Enlightenment laid the foundation for today's academic hierarchies, where the rules, both implicit and explicit, define success (Grosfoguel, 2013). These rules continue to privilege certain identities and backgrounds over others, also in our area (Harding-Kuriger et al., 2024), often creating a professional landscape that feels inaccessible to those who don't conform to its traditional standards (Western, White and Wealthy men; Grosfoguel, 2013).

The globalization of academia, particularly its Westernization through the dominance of the English language, raises critical questions about equity and accessibility (Bamberger & Morris, 2024). For scholars whose backgrounds are not aligned with this linguistic and cultural norm, the landscape becomes even more challenging (Varea et al., 2021) – as Marina recalls: a reality "I never even dared to dream of." Similarly, while academic standards are often portrayed as gender-neutral, they frequently have gendered effects (Criado-Perez, 2019). Women and minority scholars are often forced to engage in academia from a structurally disadvantaged position (Varea, 2017; Vázquez-Cupeiro, 2022).

This intersection of race, gender, class, and language often goes unacknowledged, yet it profoundly shapes how different players are positioned – or sidelined – in the game (Crenshaw, 1989). Our own experiences reflect these inequities *and* inequalities. Some of us had access to affordable doctoral studies in Spain, backed by economic support, while others benefitted from familiar cultural capital, exposure to professional environments, or financial resources that made it easier to access language training or international experiences. Unfortunately, not all of us had these advantages. Those who lacked such support

had to exert greater effort, illustrating how deeply entrenched the disparities in academia are.

Moreover, once we are in the game, these differences do not disappear. Indeed, they persist, and the need to continue investing intensifies. We are required to sacrifice personal time, distance ourselves from loved ones, and constantly balance our well-being with the demanding nature of academic life (Alfrey et al., 2016; Tietjen-Smith, 2020) – as Carmen shares: "leaving little room for other non-work-related experiences." Bourdieu (1995) argues that these sacrifices are often the price we pay to stay in the game, and they present significant challenges to both our well-being and our sense of self.

So, given all these injustices and difficulties, why do we continue to play? Despite acknowledging the flaws and inequalities in the structure, the allure of academia's status and the rewards associated with it cannot be denied. Being in academia, for instance, allows us to "dedicate to ideas – because when you need to worry about your hunger or safety, you cannot think well," exposes Fabiana. This adherence to the system, as reflected in our personal experiences and expressed through our personal statements and collages, aligns with the concept of *illusio*. It highlights how, despite the challenges, academia remains a space where recognition, personal growth, and the pursuit of knowledge offer us a sense of purpose and potential. Even as we recognize the structural inequalities *and* inequities that persist, this sense of purpose compels us to keep playing. *Illusio*, therefore, is not only disciplinary – it is affective. It fuels our persistence, even when we are aware of the costs. It yet gives authenticity to our decision on hold these spaces and remain on them, despite others claiming this to be incoherent – as argued by Eduard Louis (2018), a French writer linked to sociology and influenced by Bourdieu.

As we reflect on our *playing* journeys, we become increasingly aware of the different positions of privilege we occupy within the academic system. This awareness not only deepens our understanding of the academic field but also pushes us to examine how we can contribute to changing it. Reflecting on Sliwa and Johansson's (2014, p.79) question, "What are the possibilities of changing the field through the entry into it of a previously marginal group?," we ask ourselves how we, as "players," can contribute to change. In this sense, our collective narratives reveal that the public education system in Spain has, despite the difficulties, provided unique opportunities, including scholarships, training contracts, and access to public university studies, thus creating spaces for growth, as Engel (2007) also emphasized. Furthermore, in agreement with Vázquez-Cupeiro (2022) and Tietjen-Smith (2020), we recognize the importance of mutual support, of building bridges, particularly among women and ECS navigating academia. Through collaboration and solidarity, we form networks that offer both personal and collective support, helping us navigate a system that is often dominated by androcentric rules. These alliances are not merely support systems, they are subtle forms of resistance that challenge the exclusivity of the academic game. By creating these networks, we take collective action, counteracting the dominant academic structures and creating our own rules to better support one another, what becomes even more crucial when we are far from home.

Perpetual outsider: migrant status in the field striving to belong

Mobility within the European Union is often encouraged as a strategy for strengthening academic CVs (Sautier, 2021). Thus, having a position abroad might represent a level of achievement that overcomes what would be expected nationally; however, we see how there

is a price to be paid, an investment to be made (using Bourdieu's (1995) words), and it can be quite high on different aspects of life as shown by Harding-Kuriger et al. (2024).

It is important to note that we do not lack gratitude toward our home countries. What happened to us, happens to a lot of people, we lacked opportunities (Harding-Kuriger et al., 2024; Varea et al., 2025). The system, as it is built, uses us and our knowledge. The logic of systemic domination (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989) operationalizes *illusio* as a game that demands our passion and attention, so much so that we may lose sight of other pressing issues. And it allows the management of critical, migrant scholars like us. Putting it differently, having critical scholars in academia serves the system; it allows *outsiders* to be inside (Collins, 1986). Preventing critical people from being in academia would not be a good strategy since students who dream about changing the world come to learn within the structures (Louis, 2018). In other words, they pay fees to the neoliberal system, willing to fight it while feeding it. They are taught by scholars enthusiastic about social justice like us, and together they work to change structures but in an extent that can be monitored from close (see Diversi & Moreira, 2018). Yet, our research, mainly qualitative research, tends to be cheaper than quantitative with its labs in our field, which means a good deal. It can be frustrating if we keep going on. As we remain here, we argue that being inside, aware of the rules of the game, may give us more relevant tools to fight and play a game that is not about corruption but subversion and disruption.

These embodied sacrifices extend beyond academia into our everyday lives. We notice, thus, that the game requires us to invest energy in it under many forms, from ethical energy, to emotional and financial. The inversion happens as a strong sense of commitment constantly fighting frustration. In one word, using Carmen's voice: "Sacrifices." It is a broad commitment that is still connected to a dream, leading us to make huge efforts, move around, and leave people and places in order to achieve such a dream. We migrate, strive to belong, and face the hardships of the path (Varea et al., 2025). There are the distances, more or less frequent moments of missing people, crying times as well, feeling alone, and not quickly reaching belonging sentiments to the new places. Still, there is a fear of losing the legal condition of a migrant. This pressure demands near perfection in work (McRobbie, 2015), as losing the job could mean losing the right to stay in the country and facing the looming threat of expulsion – as Fabiana states: "I do my best and work like a horse to be able to remain in *better* places." It speaks to our sense of being, telling how low valued we may be or feel. Actually, and again, it is not about us, but the work we can provide a system with.

Thus, there is so much energy left at airports, worries about documents, and even fear during civil checks. We feel like this is an inversion of, in one word, life. There is our dream, our needs, desire (Gutierrez, 2022), libido (Freud, 2010), financial and emotional inversions. To an extent that often we are exhausted due to the psychological demands . . . but we are still happy to have a job, so motivated to keep working and producing – coming back to a sort of hamster endless wheel run or, as we discussed in one of our meetings, flying high in our *"transparent bubble"* which is transparent and allows us to see things and how tough they are, but that moves us away from places where we were unhappy – like the universities where we did not feel valued. But it also distances us, once again, from our beloved ones.

The contradictions keep striking us, echoing Marina's "yin and yang" metaphor in her collage, where the dream of thriving – while also empowering others to blossom – coexists with "precarity, hierarchies, patriarchal structures, and inequities." Therefore, education

may equip us to transcend colonization and do better. Yet at the same time, it can keep us in the game, reproducing logics of power dynamics – and we develop a feeling for the game, a sort of addiction to continue playing, pursuing ways to master the game as a, at the same time, scape and sequel of many frustrated attempts of succeeding in life. As Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1972) and his concept of *illusio* (Bourdieu, 1995) remind us, we remain invested in the very game that entraps us.

Reflecting on the final artwork: why this matters?

Through this study, we sought to understand why we are and remain in academia and what forces shape our experiences. We reported a bit of our journeys to get insight and inform our reflections, thus acting responsibly by thinking of others who may share aspects of our realities. We conclude that the reflexive and critical exercise we did in this article is important because it may prevent pain and suffering for those like us: idealists, dreaming of a better world and an academic career. People like us come full of enthusiasm and energy, willing to surrender everything to do a relevant job. Then, when disillusion sets in, it hurts profoundly and intensely. It is so deeply tough as a kind of death. A death of dreams, hope, meaning. Therefore, it would be a pleasure to work together among all-levels academics in our field to revert structures into healthier *illusios*, and communal-sense games, avoiding fantasies and deception for ECS in PESSK, and mainly avoiding disillusions, in the Spanish sense, that lead to irremediable frustration. Work together to transform academia into a place where dreams evolve rather than die, and where hope flourishes instead of fading, fostering a collaborative effort toward a more conscious and fair academia.

Notes

1. AIESEP is the acronym used for the International Organization for Physical Education in Higher Education.
2. We use PESSK as an umbrella term echoing the definition of Harding-Kuriger et al. (2024).
3. Bourdieu's positionality has been largely criticized by feminists. We, as critical feminist ECS, share such critique. We acknowledge, however, Bourdieu's theory as prolific, insightful, and applicable, especially for topics as the one addressed in this article. Thus, albeit recognizing criticisms, his theory serves our object of analysis.
4. Images copyrights for collages: Fabiana: All images available under the Pixabay or Pexels license. For links to access the images, please check Supplemental Appendix A. Carmen: All images available under public domain or the Freepik, Flickr and Getty standard licenses. Marina: All images are available under Canva's and Freepik's free content licenses.

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