

The PhD story

Life before becoming a PhD student at the Department of Sport Sciences at Malmö University

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There is limited knowledge about PhD students' backgrounds and how these backgrounds affect their research, particularly in sport sciences. Therefore, this study aims to contribute with knowledge about the backgrounds of sport sciences PhD students by investigating whether their backgrounds affect both becoming PhD students and how they conduct their research. Importantly, the study descriptively presents PhD students' stories about their backgrounds and explores whether there are general themes in these stories. Guided by an auto-monographic approach, we asked PhD students at the De-

partment of Sport sciences at Malmö University to "describe whether my background influenced me to become a doctoral student in sport sciences and whether my background affects my research." Although the PhD students' narratives include many perspectives and experiences, they also raise questions about the diversity of the group—they reveal a lack of cultural and socioeconomic diversity in the group. As a result, this article raises questions about whether "enough" is being done, by Malmö University and Department of Sport Sciences, to attract PhD students with different backgrounds.

Introduction

Studies indicate that PhD students' backgrounds, interests, and personal experiences clearly influence the choice of research area, research question, methods, and perspectives (Watthanapradith, 2016; Wright & Cochrane, 2000). Although there is some knowledge about PhD students' backgrounds in general, for example, in terms of education (Holmström, 2018; Helin et al., 2022), little is known about the background of PhD students in sport sciences and whether it affects their research (see, e.g., Schultz & Stansbury, 2022; Mueni Matheka, Jansen & Hofman, 2020; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Wright & Cochrane, 2000).

PhD students in sport sciences may differ from those in other research areas. Based on studies on physical education (PE) teachers (see Larsson, 2009), there might be reason to believe that PhD students in sport sciences are a more homogeneous group than PhD students in other areas in terms of background. For example, they have a stronger connection to sports, physical activity, or the Swedish sports movement. Moreover, the background of PhD students in sport sciences is likely to affect their research in a different way or to a higher degree than PhD students in other research areas. More precisely, the PhD students' personal interests (for example, in a specific sport) reflect their research interest, research questions, and even their conclusions. Although these are important issues that have been investigated among PhD students in general, there are large knowledge gaps (see Holmström, 2018; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

The limited knowledge is troubling. Not knowing how PhD students themselves think their background affects their research may lead them to reproduce some knowledge, structures, and social ideologies through their research (see Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). There is some research about PhD students' experiences about their background and research. However, there is a lack of studies that take the PhD perspective, particularly in relation to sport sciences (see Holmström, 2018).

Based on stories from PhD students at the Department of Sport sciences at Malmö University, this study aims to contribute with knowledge about the backgrounds of sport sciences PhD students and whether they affect PhD students concerning both getting a PhD studentship and conducting their research. By doing so, this study makes two contributions. First, it contributes with PhD students' stories about their background and how it led them to become PhD students in sport sciences. Second, this study raises questions about the (non)diversity among the PhD students and the factors that are re-

lated both to being accepted as a PhD student in sport sciences and to conducting the research.

Malmö University and the Department of Sport sciences

The Department of Sport sciences in Malmö offers several sports-related programs at the undergraduate and master's levels, including physical education teacher education and Sport Sciences master's program. There is also postgraduate training and a range of independent courses. The department has a well-developed collaborative network, and it carries out research and development projects in collaboration with various sports-related social actors (Malmö University, 2023).

Currently, the Department of Sport sciences has 17 PhD students (13 women and 4 men) in various fields. The role of sports in society is examined based on complex problems such as the regulation of sports and the formation of norms; the relationship between sports and state, market, and civil society; the selection mechanisms of particular sports; and the way social structures and social categories such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age/generation, and social class affect and are affected by sports (Malmö University, 2023). PhD students are accepted based on the following criteria (Higher Education Ordinance, ch. 7, Section 39): Those who have basic eligibility for education at postgraduate level must have

1. completed an advanced level degree;
2. completed course requirements of at least 240 higher education credits, of which at least 60 higher education credits are at an advanced level; or
3. in some other way inside or outside the country acquired essentially equivalent knowledge. The university may, for an individual applicant, grant exemptions from the requirement for basic eligibility, if there are special reasons.

Method

The participants in this study are six PhD students at Malmö University, Department of Sport sciences—six women and two men. This study is based on a qualitative method inspired by an auto-monographic approach (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). An auto-monographic approach is a technique or strategy that concentrates on researching or outlining one's own experiences in great detail. In this study, using an auto-monographic approach entails exploring PhD students' ideas, feelings, actions, and experiences through self-reflection, self-examination, and self-analysis (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). In this study, each PhD students wrote a personal story based on a particular request to “describe whether my background influenced me to become a doctoral student in sport sciences and whether my background affects my research.”

Personal stories

As described above, the main focus in this study is to present the PhD students personal stories about their background. The stories will be presented student by student.

PhD Student #1

Becoming a PhD student is mainly affected by my background in terms of “love of writing” and the “love of sport”, especially tennis. Related to them, I can also see that the individualistic way of living, as in playing tennis, studying, and working, is important for the choices that led me to where I am today, 42 years old and still a student. There might be many more important topics from my background, than these three, that have influenced me, but I consider them crucial.

I do not have a clear view on how the long-lasting love story of writing started, as none of my parents or sister are committed to writing, but in high school, my teacher in Swedish called me a “man of the pen” (in Swedish *en pennans man*). I guess I had some talent in learning language, at least Swedish and perhaps German as their grammar is similar. I have tried different kinds of writing throughout my life,



including creative writing for a short period of time. Mainly, my professional writing has taken place as a journalist at a local newspaper for ten years. I have also studied and, therefore, written texts for 25 years. In addition, I also enjoy prosaic types of writing—text messages to friends and messages on various chat forums. There is something almost magical with the written word, that is so different from the spoken word. Instead of “I think, therefore I am,” for me, the expression “I write, therefore I am” fits me better, so I guess writing is important for my identity. I cannot say I am a great writer; it is as much therapy as it is about performance, I would say. When I started the education for becoming a journalist, they told us there were two types of journalists—those who loved writing and those who wanted to change the world—and I guess I belonged in the former group. I loved my job at the newspaper, except for tough deadlines and low salary, but as writing was challenged by other tasks due to financial crisis in the media, forcing us to become multi journalists (photographing and producing live streams and online television content), and the focus was no longer on writing. So, I began to study sport sciences instead. Step by step, I started to build a relationship with academic writing. Besides writing my own texts, theses, I also started to work in the Writing Centre at Malmö University and help other students to improve their academic writing. After completing my one-year master’s thesis, it was a natural step to apply for a PhD, to be able to continue writing.

Also important for my PhD application is the curiosity about the rapid growth of the sport padel in Sweden. Having played tennis nearly all my life (I started to play when I was eight years old), I was fascinated by how a new racket sport challenged tennis and what the reasons were behind this development. Tennis (besides writing) has been my love all my life, and it was difficult for me to understand, at least in the beginning, that a “new” sport passed table tennis and badminton in popularity and finally challenged tennis! I wanted to write about this development, so I started to send different applications about padel in different PhD projects and, finally, with an environmental sustainability approach, I was approved.

Comparing these loves of my life, I would say that the love of writing was more important for becoming a PhD than the love of tennis. However, I do have a general interest in sports as well, which started when I was a kid who on some evenings threw dice to create results for teams in hockey (I grew up in a town with 14,000 inhabitants, where the hockey team was number one and the only elite sport represented), which was also a result of my interest in mathematics at this age. I fell in love with numbers, but soon words became more important. In conclusion, without my tennis interest, I would probably not have been

that fascinated by the padel boom, but I would probably have found other research interests in sports, such as media studies, to apply for a PhD.

Connected to my background in writing and sports, and important for the decision to become a PhD student, is also an individualistic way of living I have developed. To begin with, tennis has been my only sport after having stopped playing soccer at 12 years of age. Tennis is an individual sport; even though there are team competitions, you mostly play singles matches. Belonging to a sports club, a tennis club, you might think a collective community also has formed me, but to a lesser degree, I think. For me, studying, as in reading and writing, has also often been an individual activity. Raised in a middle-class family with academically educated parents (priest and teacher), of course I had valuable support from them when doing my homework as a kid, and they encouraged me to make the most out of school. Apart from that, I consider myself to have studied mostly on my own and also worked in media on an individual basis. As a journalist, at least where I have worked, there were very few collaborations between colleagues and very little feedback from managers. So, working as a journalist has been mostly an activity containing writing on my own, and studying sport sciences was also something I often did alone. Reflecting on this, I believe that I often think that other people cannot help me or that I usually solve problems regardless of my surroundings, which is both good and bad. Before I started to work in the Writing Centre, I did not realize that I could help other people either.

So, my (partly misinterpreted) thoughts about PhD work were that it is something you do, more or less, on your own, with some supervision, and therefore I thought it would suit me well. However, I have understood now that academia and research today are more about collaborative exchanges through networks and seminars. The writing process can also be collective, by writing papers together.

How has my background affected my research? Well, as I have touched upon already, it has affected both what I write about and how I write about it. The choice of topic is a result of my long-lasting interest in tennis, but I would also say my writing style from the journalism career is important to consider. I have been told through both positive and negative critique that I have a voice in my academic writing that tends to be storytelling, narrative, with a certain flow. I do not know how and why I developed this kind of “soft” writing, but as a journalist, you often want to bring a story to the readers, to gain and keep their interest. Following this, I believe this way of writing can be difficult to escape from, and in my first academic text (a book chapter in an anthology), I was told by supervisors that I was telling a story. There might be pros and cons in this

way of writing; a risk is that I get unconsciously blind for contradictions and disagreements, and a benefit might be that I am aware of context, as the context is important in narrative writing.

Wrapping up this “story” (this text is actually an example of my ambitions to weave reflections, that might need much more perspectives, and space into a short, coherent story in a few pages) I finally reflect upon how my individualistic background in working and studying is making it difficult for me to know when I should listen to and trust my own voice and ideas and when and why I should adjust to other people’s opinions. Because, as I am not used to that, I tend to want to please as many as possible, or “the right people,” when I share my work. In my view, there are a lot of necessary, fun, constructive seminars and important collaborations in academia, but they also slow down work and can be demotivating if they are difficult to relate to.

PhD Student #2

I was born and raised in what best could be described as a middle-class family. Together with two siblings and both my parents, I lived in a terraced house for the first seven years and then in a house rurally situated in a smaller “town” (less than 2,000 inhabitants). The house was located on a small farm with some horses, and during my upbringing, my father and my sister have always had a distinct interest in horses and equestrian sports. My parents worked with economics (such as tax return issues); my father was a university-educated business economist, and my mother had no post-secondary education. Both my siblings are professional engineers.

I was never really good at school, average at best; the school subject PE was the exception. Looking back, I have always liked PE and that was also the subject in which I got the highest grades through all school years. My upbringing was permeated by the importance of sports and physical activity. This was primarily a result of my father thinking this was important. During my upbringing, as I remember it, I always had very good opportunities to participate in various sports. This included, for example, different types of equipment and transport to sporting activities. For school competitions in, for example, badminton, I had my own racquet, and when I played team sports in my spare time I always had good equipment. However, when it comes to other school sub-



jects outside of PE, I do not remember the same positive pressure. I seem to remember that during middle school and above all in high school, I worked completely independently with all those things related to school (such as assignments and homework). After various “hourly” jobs, I did a year’s military service as a coast guard ranger in Stockholm. After that, I applied, not so surprisingly, for two educations: one was an economist and the other a PE teacher. I remember getting accepted into both, but because my parents convinced me that economics was “so boring,” it ended up being a PE and psychology teacher education. It was during my university studies that I became seriously interested in doctoral studies. In addition to reading extra courses, I signed up for various extra projects, both paid and non-paid. Like so many others, I had the opportunity to work closely with my supervisor (while studying psychology). I mainly worked with coding data from surveys into a statistical data program (SPSS). This may seem trivial, but during the time I had the opportunity to work with my supervisor, I learned an incredible amount. That’s when I got real ambitions to become a PhD student. I think my supervisor at the time one of the biggest reasons I became a PhD student.

After my studies, I worked for around two years as a teacher in a high school. During that time, I also finished a master’s education (two years) in pedagogics and applied to various PhD studentship positions in sport sciences and pedagogies. After some years and a handful of applications, I was finely accepted as a PhD student.

At the time of writing, I have been employed for around four years, half time as a teacher/lecturer at a university and half time as a PhD student. As a teacher, I have mainly worked with PE teachers, with statistics/method and at the police education. In my PhD project, which is about equality in physical education, I mainly use a quantitative approach. So, in one way, not so much has changed since I was 20, when I thought I either wanted to work in/with PE or with numbers (at that time as an economist).

PhD Student #3

Me as a PhD student! Unexpected!

I was born and raised in the countryside, outside a small town in the southwest of Sweden. I am the oldest of three siblings, and my parents got divorced when I was in my early teens. My mother had the main responsibility of taking care of me, my sister, and brother. She is a strong woman that has worked hard to secure a good



childhood for us. My mother met a new man who moved in with us. He had two older sons, and at that time, they had their own accommodations. Two step-brothers and the best stepfather you can imagine became a part of our family, something that benefited us all. My mother had many different employments. She worked as a waitress, had her own grocery store, and ended up as a gardener at a cemetery. My father had his own business and then became a painter. He was in an accident and injured his foot badly and became a disability pensioner quite early.

The village I grew up in was calm and provided a safe environment. In the village, there was a football club, and most of the inhabitants were involved in this club in one way or another. This football club formed my childhood and my personality in different ways. I am so grateful for my years as a football player, trainer, referee, and so on. During the time my mother and father divorced or other turbulent periods during my adolescence, I always felt that the football club gave me a safe place to be. Under a period of three to four years, I played in the same team as both my mother and sister, and that was very fun. My father was completely uninterested in sports and probably never looked at games when I or my siblings played. My stepfather, on the other hand, was very interested and quickly got involved in our sport activities.

My family never traveled abroad; there was no money, I suppose. We camped in Sweden, and Öland became a favorite place we often returned to, and later on, we also bought a summer house in which we have spent a lot of time.

In high school, I studied a program that focused on children and youth. I already felt, at that time, that I wanted a work that includes pedagogy in some way. I chose as many extra physical activities as possible, and I got high grades in those courses. After high school, I worked for six months at a preschool, and after that I went to USA and worked as a nanny for one year. Incredibly useful and an opportunity to take care of myself.

When I came back to Sweden, I applied to a folk high school (*folkhögskola*) with sports management in focus, and I studied there for a year. This was a fun and inspiring year and that made me decide to apply to become a teacher in physical education. I studied at a university for six years. A very pleasant time that gave me a good education and friends for life. I also met my future husband at the end of this period. He was also a PE teacher.

After finishing my teacher exam, I got a six-month position as a teacher in PE and English, which was followed by a similar position at a high school, where I stayed for 14 years. I have always been a person who requires a new challenge occasionally, and during those 14 years, I also had other missions, like being a team leader, being involved in staff health care and the Pulse health proj-

ect, and being a municipality-wide teacher in physical education. When I look back at that period of my life, with the opportunities to meet all these young people at a rather tough stage of their lives, every day had its challenges, and I am so thankful for all the knowledge I achieved thanks to all the students I met, especially during my time as a PE teacher. After 14 years in primary school, I got a chance to apply as a teacher trainer at the university in the city I lived. I needed this personal development, and it was a perfect time to do something else. Meeting a new kind of student included a personal development in a good way.

Physical education and, above all, making people get physically active, especially children and youth, has always been an important issue for me. In addition to being a teacher in physical activity, I have also worked as a sports leader, instructor, and a leader of different kinds of projects that include physical activity. I also had the opportunity to be a part of a network that educated physical activity coaches in school. Without this opportunity, I would never have applied to become a PhD student. One thing leads to another. My ambition when I started to work at the university was to teach; doing research was never in my thoughts and nothing that really interested me. To be able to continue working at the university, at least a master's degree was needed. For two years, I combined working as a teacher with studying sport sciences in academia and achieving a master's degree. Incredibly educational, but also very tough.

One day, I got at least ten emails from colleagues. There was a postgraduate education that would suit me. At first, I told them I was not interested; I wanted to teach and absolutely not spend five years of doing research. One day I read the description, and it was like the application was written especially to me. After discussions with my husband, my sister, friends, and colleagues, I decided to apply. When I applied, I felt this will probably work out.

That is how it turned out: I was offered to start as a PhD student at a university and realized that this was something I could not refuse. It was an opportunity for me to be a part of something important, and hopefully the outcome of my research can be a part of the future and a chance to make a difference. I am only in the beginning of my PhD adventure. I am hopeful, I am thankful, and I am looking forward to being a part of this.

PhD Student #4

I grew up with my family (parents and three siblings) in a house in a medium-sized city. My parents and large parts of the family are academics; my father is a lawyer and my mother an economist. I have always found school to be fun and, up until junior high, pretty easy. I got high grades in elementary school and applied to what, in my opinion, was the hardest program in high school, natural science in English. I did not really choose this purely out of interest but rather because my parents expected it and because my best friend also applied for the same program. I did not have it as easy in high school, getting average grades. However, I did well on the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test, which helped me when I later applied for higher education. Getting an education has always been obvious in my family; my sister is a lawyer, my little brother a political scientist, and my twin brother an administrator. When after graduation it was time to apply for higher education, I applied to several programs, but with one theme: physical education teacher training in both Stockholm and Örebro, sports pedagogy in Halmstad, and health pedagogy at GIH Stockholm. I was accepted to all of them but in the end chose the physical education teacher training at GIH Stockholm.



Sports and the naturalness of movement have always been in my life, in one way or another. My siblings and I did different sports; I practiced gymnastics and my siblings played handball and badminton, and fenced. During the sports holiday, the family went skiing in the Alps, and we were in the forest almost every Sunday. I got the highest marks in physical education and health in both primary and secondary school and always saw the subject as one of my favorite subjects. I stopped gymnastics at the age of 15; I was actually a mediocre gymnast but thought the training was fun and enjoyed being with my teammates. Instead, I became a coach for a group of children aged five to six and eventually also for a group of boys aged seven and up. I enjoyed the coaching role very much and, at the same time, discovered that I was quite good at it. I, who in my youth was a very shy person, fell very naturally into the leadership role that was required of me. Without this positive experience in the coaching role, I probably would never have applied to the PE teacher program.

I loved the PE teacher training but felt when I finished, aged 22, that I was too young to start working as a teacher. I studied one more school subject, biology, and traveled and worked a bit before I got my first post as a PE teach-

er, aged 25. I only stayed one year in this position as it was a long commute and, instead, got a position as a physical education teacher in my hometown. I worked as a teacher in physical education and health and biology for a few years and really enjoyed my job. Slowly, however, thoughts of “should I do this for the rest of my life” began to creep in. I was thinking about different alternative career paths when I accidentally found an announcement for doctoral positions for a licentiate graduate school. I honestly did not know what a licentiate degree was, and although I had come across the term PhD student before, I did not really know what the position entailed. However, I saw it as a way “out” of the PE teacher life and applied. To my surprise, I was accepted, even though I had no degree at an advanced level.

Being a PhD student and getting a PhD have never been a dream or a goal for me. However, now that I am here, I think it is fantastically developing, both on a personal and academic level. However, it has taken me a long time to see myself as a researcher, despite the fact that I have now completed a licentiate degree and will hopefully soon receive my doctorate degree. I identified myself as a PE teacher rather than a researcher for a long time, and throughout my PhD studies, I have been plagued with an inferiority complex; I think everyone else seems to know so much more than I do. However, I am moving in a direction towards a kind of confirmation of my own knowledge and myself, perhaps that this will work out anyway, perhaps that I, too, will become a researcher? I have also, throughout my PhD studentship let my private life come before my PhD position. I have had two children and have been on parental leave for a total of three years with them. I have chosen to step down in working hours in order to spend time with my children and take care of myself. My PhD time has thus been neither short nor straight, but rather long and crooked, but I think that sometimes that is the best option.

PhD Student #5

My parents were born in the 1940s, and at that time, it was seven-year primary school that applied. Already as teenagers, they had acquired plenty of work experience. It was, of course, about everyday chores on their own family farms, but it was also about work in the neighboring village’s quarry, employment as a maid for the landowner, and apprentice upholsterer at the furniture factory.



Mother and father met in the early 1960s during a year at folk high school. They were young and in love and had to write to the king for permission to marry because mother was not 18 years old. Six months after the wedding my oldest brother was born. In the mid-1960s, father trained as a police officer in Malmö—an education that lasted ten months, including internship, which can be compared to today's 30-month education.

The first sod was broken for the red brick house I grew up in in the late 1960s; then my second older brother was also born. The house was built in a small village of 250 inhabitants just outside a city which at that time increased its population by over one hundred percent from 15,000 to 37,000 inhabitants. Although it was not far from the city and the house was located in a residential area, it was rural. In addition to a few scattered farms and a residential area with nine houses, there was a shop, an old school, and a small cemetery without a church. The school had not been in use for a long time, and the business closed in the first half of the 1970s, which was around the same time I was born. Just ten kilometers away, a larger department store had opened its doors with an assortment that more than fulfilled the desire of the shopaholic. What, however, added color to both the village and life in it was the sports ground. It was a place of ancient ancestry; football had been played at the same venue since the early 1930s. At the start, it consisted of pasture, and before kick-off, the players had to shovel away the livestock's waste. When I was growing up, the sports ground consisted of two large grass football pitches, a clay football pitch, a changing room building, and a clubhouse. The latter was built in the early 1980s with the help of income from bingo operations.

The sports association's catchment area was, and still is today, made up of several smaller villages. At the men's team's matches, the kiosk was open. It was festive, as it was the closest thing to a shop in the village you could get. I remember getting a hot dog and a Loranga soft drink for ten Swedish kronas. Much of the family's free time was spent on the sports field with various club activities. Both my brothers, like me, played football in teams led by my father. But there were not enough chores for the family; we washed match clothes, mowed football pitches, managed irrigation, sledded gravel pitches, and cleaned dressing rooms. My father was also on the sports association's board; for a long time, he held the chairman's gavel in his hand. Together with other association leaders, my father started a business that we children and young people could do in the winter months when football lay fallow waiting for thawed pitches. For me and my peers, football was never a winter sport until possibly when we started as 14-year-olds in the association's women's team. The winter activity that occupied all the children of the villages on Monday

evenings was called “the cozy club.” The cozy club also accommodated those who did not feel at home in the sports environment. In the neighboring village’s dining hall, I and about 80 other children sat and did lots of crafts. At one table, plaster figures were cast; at another, beautiful and sometimes smaller eye-catching creations were made of pipe cleaners and flirt balls and more. For those who could not sit still, there were various physical activities in the gym opposite the hall. Even though, as the younger sister of two older brothers, I had acquired the right attitude (*skinn på näsan*, a Swedish idiom that means to be tough) and a decent physique, I very rarely dared to take part in the activities in the gymnasium. Those who stayed there were mostly the boys. The cozy club ended every year with a trip to Liseberg Amusement Park. At the edge of spring, three large buses were filled with expectant children. I do not think any of the leaders breathed a sigh of relief until everyone had been counted and the buses rolled back towards the Småland forests.

My very first sports management assignment was at the age of 14, for a girls’ football team. The girls I coached were four years younger than me. Much later, I coached some of the girls’ daughters or sons. For 35 years, I have worked in leadership and coaching roles in various sports and for various ages; it has been everything from kids to seniors. During my first senior coaching training session, I remember being almost the only woman and the youngest. In retrospect, I have understood that both ingredients contributed to the fact that it was easy to have fun at my expense.

Studying at university was not obvious to me; no one in the family had experience of higher education. When the university in the city started an education that could generate work in the sports movement, an application was sent in. Suddenly it felt obvious, and I was lucky to have received one of the places. In the years before my studies, I mainly worked as a recreation leader for children and young people, which included running a leisure farm and, in my case, working with peer support activities in primary school. In the role of recreation leader, I also worked with ANT, which stands for alcohol, narcotics, and tobacco. It was a prevention program which, like the peer support work, took as its starting point the self-esteem, attitudes, and values of children and young people. It was work that did not only involve contact with children and young people; it also included contact with parents or other adults close to the young people. Over the years, my father has been a role model for me and both consciously and unconsciously influenced the choices and decisions I have made. In his role as a police officer, he worked for a long period with young people at risk, which was work that was about preventing young people from ending up in drug abuse and crime. Although police cases were never

discussed at home at our kitchen table, there were often long conversations and discussions based on social issues.

During primary school as well as during high school, social studies and sports were my favorite subjects. Perhaps it is surprising that I am a PhD student but not that I am a PhD student in a social science faculty and in the subject of sport sciences. The fact that I choose to study sports leaders' everyday work with children and young people based on a qualitative method with ethnographically inspired tools is not surprising either. This text has been about my roots in the countryside and sports club life; it has been about how interests and value-based issues have shaped career choices as well as choices of education and studies.

PhD Student #6

Throughout my childhood, I identified myself as the “athletic girl.” Pretty much all my free time was spent on sports activities. I often wondered what other kids did who did not do any sports. They must have had plenty of time.

It was often a safety to be the athletic girl. When others started to take an interest in “nonsense,” I went to training or matches. Through sports, I gained an identity that I was proud of, but I also gained the joy of movement and physical self-esteem that made me dare to try new sports. I followed in my father's footsteps and started playing soccer and bandy at the age of six. A few years later, I also started playing ice hockey. My parents were always supportive and present in my activities. I never felt any pressure.

I grew up in a house in a village, near two medium-sized cities, together with my mother, father, and older sister. We lived close to nature and were often out in the forest. We cycled to school as much as possible. When I was five years old, my sister got her own horse, which meant that we spent a lot of time in the stable. My father also had a big interest in sports, which affected me. We often went together and watched sporting events. Both my mother and father were pre-school teachers and worked in different ways with children with special needs.

When I started school, PE became the favorite subject. I liked school and always had it easy. I never felt that my parents made any demands on me when it came to school. When I was about to start lower secondary school, there was



an option to choose a profile school with a focus on soccer. For me, it was natural to choose the soccer school, even though my closest friends chose another school. During my teenage years, sports became more and more serious. I had to stop playing bandy because soccer and hockey required more attendance. When it was time to choose a high school, I chose a school with a soccer profile. I moved far away from home by myself and started to stand on my own two feet. I had previously been among the best in my teams, but now the competition increased. I stopped playing ice hockey because soccer demanded more presence. Slowly but surely, the joy I always felt from sports was replaced by performance demands. I think it affected me more than I realized at the time. After high school, I put the soccer shoes on the shelf. I continued with physical activity on my own. I had found the joy of movement in other forms—gyms and exercise runs.

I worked as a supply teacher at various preschools and applied to study physiotherapy at university and got in. The years at university were a dream, where I got to learn more about physical activity and health. My bachelor's thesis highlighted young people's views on health and physical activity. I received good help from my supervisor, which created an interest in research. The thesis received attention in newspapers, and together with my supervisor, we rewrote the thesis into a scientific article. The interest in studying further to get a master's degree was awakened, and I jumped into a master's education immediately after my bachelor's degree. I studied at a 50% pace and worked full-time as a physiotherapist. I wrote a master's thesis that again highlighted young people's view of health, now in relation to elite sports. I received good support from my supervisor, who encouraged me to apply for a PhD. In the last semester of the master's program, I saw an advertisement at Malmö University, which piqued my interest. I was not sure I would get in, coming from a different scientific field. But I applied and got in!

I think that my childhood and sports background have influenced me a lot, albeit unconsciously, in my choice of research topic. I am a PhD student in sport sciences. Sports shaped my identity throughout my childhood. I owe a lot to sports. But I also have experience of the downside with sports. Something that has always been with me is the joy of movement I developed during my childhood years. I have many positive memories connected to physical activity. In my research, I study physical activity in children who do not reach the recommendations for physical activity. Now I want to give back to the children who were not as privileged as me, my sister, and teammates. I am humbled by the fact that all children have different conditions for physical activity for different reasons. My training as a physiotherapist has given me a lot of knowl-

edge about not only obstacles and opportunities for physical activity but also the conditions for creating adapted physical activity.

My thoughts go once again to the children that I thought about even as a child: the children who did not play sports. What did they do? In my research, I am now looking for the answers. I want to talk to them, give them a voice, and create an understanding of how society can help them create positive memories of physical activity and create joy in movement.

Discussion and reflections

The personal stories from the six PhD students at the Department of Sport Sciences at Malmö University raise questions about (non)diversity. Based on the stories, this study addresses whether there might be similarities in terms of social class, education, interest in sports, research driven by individual interests, and the importance of personal relations/networks (here referred to as “significant key persons”). Although the stories illustrate both varying personal backgrounds and varying experiences about how PhD students’ backgrounds affect their research, they also reveal similarities and indicate that the group is relatively homogeneous.

The personal stories showed that many of the PhD students’ parents have a higher educational level and that their family income during their upbringing was not an obvious obstacle. In general, this indicates that PhD students’ socioeconomic background, in terms of education and income, is high. However, there were exceptions—one or two students had a lower socioeconomic background than the rest but still counted as middle class). All the PhD students in this study reported having a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, or equivalent education. In addition, most of them also have additional education, such as additional courses, degrees, or educations from the private market.

The majority of the PhD students described that physical activity and sports have been a large part of their life. Their childhood and youth have been characterized by sports, physical activities, and outdoor life. Many of them explained that they have been variably influenced by the Swedish sports movement. In general, all the doctoral students have been involved in some type of organized sport. Many also described a sense of belonging to sports, recounting how sports have been a natural part of their life, and expressed a positive view and attitude towards sports. However, it may be worth noting that the PhD students may have been inclined to emphasize the influence of the Swedish

sports movement because it is strongly associated with the identity of working in and belonging to a sport sciences department in Sweden.

A striking aspect in several stories is that many of the PhD students are re-searching something that is clearly related to their background, upbringing and personal interest. PhD students who had an interest in a specific sport or in outdoor life often had a research project that was focused on the same thing.

Several doctoral students recounted how one or more persons in their life somehow influenced and contributed to their decision to apply for a PhD. This included, for example, a supervisor, a partner, a parent, or a teacher. These significant key persons were described as significant in contributing to collaboration around academic projects and in offering motivation and encouragement; in a broad sense, these significant key persons created opportunities for the PhD students.

Notably, in many personal stories, working at a university and being accepted into a PhD program was described as a “coincidence.” In other words, several of the doctoral students believe that they were admitted to the doctoral program “by chance”. However, another, perhaps sharper, interpretation could be that these PhD students do not realize they are privileged.

Concluding reflections

This article zooms in on the personal backgrounds of six of the 17 PhD students currently in the Department of Sport sciences at Malmö University. By presenting personal stories from six PhD students, this study sheds some light on an area where there is a lack of knowledge—namely knowledge about the personal and socioeconomic background of PhD students in sport sciences and whether their background affects their research. Although this article focused on presenting the personal stories of PhD students in their own words and then highlighting the commonalities, the stories themselves raise questions on whether the PhD program comprises a non-diverse and homogeneous group. Specifically, several PhD students seem to have similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and most of them have had a positive and strong connection to the Swedish sport movement; in addition, their research projects are often closely connected to the sporting area in which they have a personal interest. This may be problematic since Malmö University strives to attract and hire people with diverse backgrounds. The university states that “widened recruitment and widened participation are part of our university’s DNA” (Malmö University, 2018). Based on the ambitions at Malmö University, this study raises questions

about whether “enough” is being done to broaden recruitment and hire PhD students with diverse backgrounds at the Department of Sport sciences.

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