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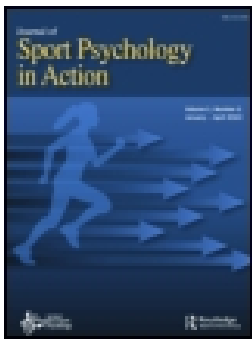
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## Identity and Cultural Transition: Lessons to Learn from a Negative Case Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present a single case study of identity crisis that unfolded in the cultural transition context. Our participant was 'Jenni' – a 26 years old female basketball player with the double (Scandinavian and African American) ethnic identity. In a series of life story interviews, she shared her story of migrating to the USA at the age of 16 for sport and study. Jenni's transition narrative was extracted and analyzed using several complementary theoretical frameworks, including the intersectionality perspective on identity. The analysis of the transition narrative revealed that in spite of the pre-transition high expectations about the transition success, Jenni experienced a crisis-type cultural transition with her identity crisis at its heart. Jenni's significant others voluntary or involuntary contributed to her identity crisis by problematizing and/or marginalizing layers of her identity. We conclude with recommendations for sport psychology practitioners and other stakeholders to help them support athletic migrants' identity negotiations.

### KEYWORDS

Identity crisis;  
intersectionality of athlete  
identity; narrative;  
transitional support

*In the States, like everything Scandinavian<sup>1</sup> was taken away from me. Like there was nobody who could even understand what I'm talking about – and then it's like, it goes to the little things, like, having curfews which I never had at home or..., In my home country..., if something happened to me, I usually didn't tell somebody about it right away, but at least I knew I had the option. In America, I felt like I didn't have that option.*

In the narrative extract above we witness a part of 'Jenni's' (pseudonym) life story in which she shared her experiences of moving away from home, at age 16, to play basketball in the USA. Her transition narrative reconstructed below contains all the features of a crisis-transition (Stambulova, 2003, 2017), and we think that her experiences provide a good platform to discuss what support she needed, but did not receive, both before and during the transition (Ryba et al., 2016, 2020). Globalization of the sports

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industry has produced a considerable number of athletes dreaming about and moving to the US from different countries to participate in quality training and competitions. Therefore, it is important to hear their voices and learn lessons from their stories (Ryba et al., 2018, 2020) to inform sport psychology practitioners, coaches, teachers, family members, and others who are expected to provide external transitional support, especially when migrants are young and immature (like Jenni appeared throughout her story). In tracing Jenni's experiences in this paper, our focus will be on her identity negotiations within the cultural transition context and the roles of her significant others (both in the country of origin and the new settlement location) in co-constructing her identity crisis and less than successful transition outcomes.

Cultural transition research and practice are uniquely situated in an overlap between the athlete career and the cultural sport psychology discourses, taking insights from both (Ryba et al., 2018; Stambulova et al., 2020). The theoretical perspectives we are going to use for analyzing Jenni's case include:

- the whole person approach (e.g., Wylleman, 2019) to direct us to consider Jenni's adjustments in sport and non-sport domains (e.g., studies, social and private life);
- the athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003, 2017) to facilitate understanding of her transition process as an interplay between transition demands, resources, barriers, and coping strategies influencing the transition pathway and successful or less successful outcomes;
- the cultural transition model (Ryba et al., 2016) to keep in mind conventional cultural transition phases (pre-transition, acute cultural adaptation, and sociocultural adaptation) and consider how the mechanisms of cultural adaptation (social repositioning, negotiation of cultural practices, and meaning reconstruction) were displayed in Jenni's case;
- the intersectionality perspective on identity (Ronkainen et al., 2016a, 2016b; Schinke et al., 2019) to trace how various dimensions of Jenni's identity were engaged during the transition process and influenced her adjustment.

According to the classic definition of Nancy Schlossberg, any transition "results in a change in assumptions about oneself ..." (1981, p. 5), that is, it implies adequate or less adequate (i.e., crisis-type) self-identity transformations. In the 'career' sport psychology research, identity issues were for a long time simplified by means of focusing almost exclusively on athletic identity and how to prevent its foreclosure (e.g., Park et al., 2013; Petitpas & France, 2010). In more recent dual career research there is a shift to considering how student-athletes coordinate athletic and academic identities (e.g., Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019), which while more inclusive of multiple identities still does not capture the real complexity, fluidity, and

intersectionality of athletes' identities. In selecting Jenni's case, we hoped to highlight the interplay of multiple layers of her identity at the nexus of her cultural transition crisis. Specifically, we attempted to show Jenni's identity negotiations in diverse social fields (e.g. sport, school and family) as she sought to (re)construct meaning of herself and her relational life. Below we briefly overview Jenni's case, then present her transition story, and finally, informed by the above theoretical perspectives, we provide our analysis and reflections on the lessons to learn from her experiences, including recommendations for practitioners working with transnational student-athletes.

### **A brief overview of Jenni's case**

The transition case we are going to analyze is extracted from a series of three career pathway interviews (totaling five hours narration and 67 pages of transcript) with a Scandinavian basketball player, Jenni. At the time of the interviews, Jenni was a 26-year-old, semiprofessional player and a graduate student in her home country. She was born in a mixed-race family: her mother is Scandinavian and her father is African American who left the USA for a Scandinavian country, but kept contacts with his extended family. When Jenni was asked about her ethnic-racial identity, she answered: "... half Scandinavian, half African American. They both are important to me, so, I don't consider myself as either/or – like, Scandinavian, I always say both". There are three children in the family, with Jenni being the oldest. The family is bilingual: parents talk in English to each other, as does the father with his children, but mother and the children communicate in the local language. Due to this, all the children have good proficiency in the English language. Both parents received a university education. Because Jenni's father was a professional basketball player, he coached her and the local team. Jenni started in basketball at six years of age and has been considered a talented player at all the levels she played. As a junior, Jenni won several national championships and participated in international playoffs and friendly games, including a successful tournament in the US, in which she was a starring player. After that her father started to encourage her to move to the US to play basketball and study. Jenni had good grades and the communicated dream goal was to get an athletic scholarship at an American Division I university. Her father also felt that she should move to the US earlier (e.g., for the last high school year) to be noticed and recruited, and that she could live with the American part of the family in the US city 1. So, Jenni moved to the US for her last year at high school, to play basketball and live with her large extended family in their American home. In total, she spent six years in the US including one year at high school, two years at community college

(living with her American relatives during all of this period), and three years at university in the US city 2 where she lived on campus. She managed to play basketball in Division I and to graduate from that university with a degree in general studies. During those years, Jenni experienced ‘ups-and-downs’ in her sport, education, social and personal life, complicated by her dual racial-ethnic identity, personal immaturity, lack of preparation for the transition and poor external support.

### **Jenni’s transition story**

Jenni’s life story is a subjective reconstruction of past events with an attempt to make sense of the self across time and contexts. In telling her story, Jenni does not only disclose her personal experiences, but also speaks about the cultures in which she was developing and transforming her identity. In what follows, we present Jenni’s transition story using extensively her own words, and our interpretations guided by the theoretical perspectives presented above, with an emphasis on the identity intersectionality perspective.

Several times during the interviews, Jenni emphasized being close to her parents and her siblings, caring about them and wanting them to be happy. The parents saw her as a role model for younger kids (also playing basketball), and therefore moving to the US and earning an athletic scholarship was seen as her mission for the sake of the family. At their Scandinavian home there were many artifacts related to her father’s interests, as Jenni reflected:

So it’s like our home is full of American stuff meaning like, my dad cooks a lot of American food, and then, of course, music, and then we watch a lot of CNN, so we hear a lot about what’s going on in the States... and watching, of course, NBA, American league in basketball, and things like that.

Jenni also described having good friends and teammates in her hometown before going to the US, and she mentioned “I’ve always been a relationship person... I like being with someone else.” So, Jenni’s situation before the transition was mainly positive, and she used a metaphor of “an overblown balloon” to describe how she felt before the relocation:

It is like balloon super filled with air... It is because I was really excited about going, ...but I was also scared. So maybe the balloon, but my dad was holding on to the string, so I can’t just fly off, so he’s still like, protecting me ...”.

It sounded like Jenni’s parents were sure that she might adjust well in the US, and therefore didn’t really prepare her. When asked about whether her parents talked to her about potential challenges (e.g., including the interracial discourse in the States) she answered: “No”, and then added:

Well, my mom told me before I left – she was like “oh, we have to go get you birth control pills”, and I was like “what for?” She said like, “they’ll help you for your cramps, so just eat them” or whatever. That’s what she said... but yeah, I think she had a little hidden message in there as well. She probably knew it was going to happen – that I was going to get the attention – but ... I was really immature. Boys didn’t start to interest me until like, maybe, first year of college. Like, I was off doing other things, mainly basketball.

Jenni moved to the US to get into the last year of her high school education, play basketball there and try to find a way to get a university scholarship after graduation. Her father went with her and stayed for a month to help with basic adjustments, but when he left, many things appeared more difficult than expected:

I moved in with my aunt and my grandma, and ... that was really difficult because I wasn’t with my family anymore, I was with my dad’s side of the family, which we went to see during the summers, but now I have to live with them... Everybody made fun of my accent, because I spoke differently, so then when they said it, I didn’t want to talk because it was stupid – like why couldn’t they listen to what I had to say instead of the accent? So then, I was just really quiet... And then in high school, I was a senior, and all the seniors had already been together for three years before, so they already knew everybody, had their own gangs, cliques.

Jenni did feel alone both at home and at school. Her hope was basketball, but it appeared that she was not permitted to play during the first six weeks because she failed to prepare all the formal papers, which was noticed and reported by parents of one other player. Jenni felt devastated but helpless to change the situation, and just waited until the necessary papers were done. Studies were not a problem at her high school year, and she liked to go to classes, while basketball (when she started to play) and her social life had some ‘ups and downs’ and the family situation was continuously hard. Below is a series of Jenni’s reflections disclosing how various dimensions of her identity were problematized and/or marginalized by people around her in the American family, school, and the basketball team, contributing to her identity crisis and compromised well-being:

I didn’t get along with my cousins... I heard later on that they were always talking bad about me. Like, behind my back, to my aunt and my grandma. Like, that I didn’t do anything around the house or anything like that... And especially since I felt like a visitor anyway, unless I was told to do something, I didn’t do anything. I just stayed in my room and watched TV. I didn’t really talk to anybody unless they talked to me... And then I didn’t get along with the youngest cousin at all... He would take my homework and throw it in the trash, then pour milk over it. Or when I’m in a room, watching TV, he would unplug everything, so I had to plug it back. He’d do like, annoying things... but he was a baby of the house.

Then, I remember when I was walking the first day to school with my oldest cousin, she’s like “all the boys are going to like you, because you’re light-skinned and you have a big butt”. I didn’t understand what she meant by that, because like, in my

home country, having a big butt isn't necessarily a good thing... Later, a lot of people were calling me light-skinned. But then, like after a while, people would already know that I'm black, or that I have black in me. So, at that time, I never knew what is there making it so obvious to everybody else. And then, people were saying that "I talked like a black person", and my response was "how does a black person talk?" Like, what does that mean? It was like, "oh, I don't know – you're just black".

Of course, people were asking me about my home country but paradoxically I didn't like to talk about it – I didn't like to tell them about what home was for me... People would not necessarily label me, but it was then like, "okay, that's the girl from Scandinavia". But I didn't want to be necessarily different from anybody else, so instead of just using that to make me different and to stand out, I didn't want to talk about it, I just tried to blend in with everybody else.

[In basketball, closer to the end of the season] I asked my coach if anybody has been interested in me, like, playing-wise, scholarship, and he's like "oh, well, they called and said that you didn't fit like – you hadn't filled out a form to be eligible, so you can't play division one or two next year" and I'm like "What paper? Like, nobody told me about no damn paper". So then, after that I was like, this year feels like such a waste... I was really crushed after that, because I knew I was good enough to go play somewhere else, like go straight to a division at university, and that was taken away from me and finding out that I had to go to a junior college and to live with my aunt and my grandma for another two years was like – I could've jumped off from a building.

From the quotes above, Jenni's school years engaged her in trying to develop a sense of belonging in new settings, while those around her (e.g., relatives, peers, coach) were not accepting Jenni (or at least that is how Jenni felt) because of her identity. This is likely why, later in her college years, Jenni developed a romantic relationship with an African American man; it became her priority, positioned ahead of her studies, basketball, and friends. That is how she tried to compensate for discomfort with other people and to satisfy her need for feeling safe (the latter also might explain her drinking and smoking behavior reported in the quote below):

I always went to classes, but I didn't do any work. And then went to practice, and then went to my boyfriend's – I hated being at my aunt and my grandma's house. I tried – like, I always left from the house at eight in the morning, even if I didn't have class, so that I could be dropped off at school and then I just hung out at school. I came home at like, ten or eleven at night and went straight to bed... During my college years, it was a lot of drinking and smoking [weed]. So, I think that's how I dealt with the situation. I wasn't like a drug addict or anything, but that's how I dealt with it.

The interviewer reminded Jenni of her balloon metaphor and asked whether this image had changed during the transition:

Maybe after the first year, I felt like my balloon got smaller and smaller, like during my [the US city 1] years... And I felt somebody was always holding onto the string.



... I still lived with my [American] family and had to follow their rules... I didn't want to disrespect them. So, it was still doing their way... I mean I didn't live on my own life. So, it wasn't until moving to [university in the US city 2] that I was kind of released.

Moving to the university made Jenni focus on her boyfriend more strongly to keep her long-distance relationship alive, but after a while, she found out that the boyfriend was cheating on her and dating another girl. That situation threatened her young woman's identity and was echoed in the 'downsizing' of her other identities:

When I went to [the US city 2], it was still about the boyfriend, and then when that went to hell, then it became to kind of just trying to deal by not thinking about anything... I felt like I didn't focus on anything 100%. Like, school was halfway, basketball was halfway, and just, and talked to my family less and less. Because I was either drinking or doing other stuff, – pretty much so-called doing what everybody else was doing.

She didn't talk much about the US university period. Some things got better (e.g., more autonomy) but both studies and sport seemed not to be personally meaningful because Jenni didn't have any clear plans, neither about basketball nor about another (post-sport) career. After graduation she moved back to her home country, reunited with her family, continued to play basketball, and decided to pursue graduate studies.

During the interviews Jenni was invited to share her sentiments about the support she got from her parents or anybody else in the US. It appeared she didn't know about professional support typically available at college/university level, and she positively mentioned only one coach who was not focused just on results, but was interested in, and acknowledged, other spheres of players' lives. Keeping in mind Jenni's affectionate attachment to her immediate family, one could expect her to turn to them when things went wrong for advice and emotional support. But this appeared not to be the case, and Jenni put pressure on herself to keep them thinking that she was fine:

I knew ... I didn't want letting my family down. Like, "I have to make them proud". And instead of like, doing things for myself, it was "what would my parents want me to do?" And then my dad was always telling me "you're really setting a great example for your siblings"... So, he was always saying, "You know that if you go out there and work hard, that you can get a scholarship, and you know, just keep that up and you're doing great". ... I think it was all in my head... And then the drugs and everything just made me forget about it, because when I was high, I really didn't think of anything. I think that was why I did it.

It was interesting to note that participation in the interviews had a therapeutic effect, and stimulated Jenni to rethink and perceive her former transition experiences in a different way:

To be going through everything again and then seeing it in a different perspective was really good. That's why I'm really happy I'm involved in these [the interviews], because it's like therapy for me, going through everything. So then, afterwards – like now, I'm thinking I should, I kinda want to talk to my family about it. Like, what really was going on with me during that time.

## Reflections and lessons to learn

After discussing Jenni's story with each other, we offer a summary of our reflections informed by the theoretical perspectives (whole person approach, athletic career transition, intersectional identity) listed in the introduction. We also provide recommendations for practitioners working with transnational student-athletes. Our reflection structure uses the conventional cultural transition phases (pre-transition, acute cultural adaptation, and sociocultural adaptation) within the cultural transition model (Ryba et al., 2016).

### *Pre-transition*

To begin with, Jenni went to the US during mid adolescence, which is the decisive period for identity formation and future planning (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Identity awareness and co-constructing its different dimensions are important for “who-am-I-understanding” and also for seeing the future perspective. In the pre-transition period (in her home country) Jenni thought she knew “who she was”: a good student, basketball player, friend, sister, and daughter. She was also aware about her double race/ethnicity and communicated her Scandinavian and African American identities as equally important for her. However, she was naïve about racial politics and very young to have given much due consideration to what she wanted to do in life. When her father suggested that Jenni would move to the US to get noticed and recruited to play in a Division I university on an athletic scholarship, she internalized his idea (centralizing her athletic identity as being intersected with the student identity) and turned it into a life-goal. Additional factors forcing her to internalize the goal were the father's arguments that moving to the US was prestigious and important for her and the whole family, because she was supposed to pave the way for the younger siblings. It was this type of communication in the family that surfaced her daughter's and sister's identities. Jenni developed a lot of positive expectations and dreams (e.g., her “balloon super filled with air” metaphor), instead of practically preparing for the transition (e.g., reconnecting with the American relatives, searching for information about the school, and what papers she needed to be eligible to play basketball there). Based on Jenni's story, her parents did not seem to steer her toward that and

were rather one-sided in terms of her preparation (e.g., birth control pills). The point here is that she was not prepared for the transition, and this made her situation upon arrival more difficult than it could have been. To prevent such a situation, we encourage practitioners and migrants' significant others: (a) To ensure that the decision to move is taken by an athlete autonomously and not forced or internalized under external pressure (Ryba et al., 2020). (b) To stimulate and support the holistic preparation (e.g., cultural, athletic, psychological, psychosocial), helping to develop awareness of the anticipated demands and relevant resources pre-transition (e.g., cultural knowledge, role-play of potential difficult situations and coping); (c) To encourage preliminary planning for the future and increase a migrant's awareness about unavoidable identity changes (i.e., of becoming "a different person" preferably for the better) in the process of the transition coping.

### ***Acute cultural adaptation (never completed)***

Jenni's awareness about adjustment demands she would need to cope with during her initial US period (e.g., fit in the team and the American family, get social acceptance and develop a sense of belongingness) was low. In addition, having a lack of cultural resources (e.g., knowledge, experiences) and a number of barriers (e.g., non-supportive American family, limited communication with home family, failure to complete necessary papers to play at the high school and then at the university level) she used mainly emotion-focused and avoidance coping strategies (e.g., being withdrawn, drinking, smoking, trying to forget). These maladaptive strategies were unable to facilitate effective coping and led to crisis-transition. This was characterized by decrease in self-worth (her balloon "got smaller and smaller"), emotional discomfort (e.g., disappointment, frustration, confusion), increase in psychological barriers (didn't want to talk about her home country and with American family members), and disorientation in decision making and behavior (tried "not to think about anything"; see more in Stambulova, 2017). Jenni tried to escape into her romantic relationship, putting all other things aside (which made things worse), but after her boyfriend's betrayal she entered a new crisis. Her "balloon" has become smaller again, and even basketball was not fun anymore. The balloon metaphor was illustrative for Jenni's identity transformations during the transition. Her "super filled balloon" was co-constructed mainly by her father, making Jenni confident that she can manage well in the US (e.g., to become a American good student and successful basketball player). Her "smaller and smaller balloon" was co-constructed by many people (American relatives, peers, boyfriend, coach), who held her back by marginalizing layers (e.g., ethnic, athletic,

academic, family, peer, girlfriend) of her identity and limiting her sense of control over life.

When entrapped in crisis-transition, athletes need external support to facilitate their understanding of the situation and develop necessary coping resources and strategies. But Jenni felt that in the US she “didn’t have that option”. Lessons to be learned from this part of the analysis are: (a) Migrant-athletes, especially when young and immature, might not be aware of the support opportunities available, or feel unable to share their problems. Therefore, significant others are advised to keep an open (non-judgmental) attitude and to direct migrants to resources and opportunities for getting help. (b) Given Jenni’s reflection about interviews acting as therapy by producing and communicating intersectional (identity) narratives, we suggest that various forms of account making and narrative therapy (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2008) that provide narrative resources (e.g., other athletic migrants’ stories) might make a positive contribution in facilitating acute cultural adaptation (see Ryba et al., 2020).

### ***Socio-cultural adaptation (never really happened)***

Jenni’s crisis-transition (with no proper support) eventually led her to less successful transition outcomes than she had hoped. Generally, a successful transition outcome is associated with subjective feelings of being adjusted and satisfying basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Stambulova et al., 2020), and in a cultural transition (seen as fluid and open-ended), a symbolic exit is characterized by migrant athletes’ optimal functioning in novel environments (Ryba et al., 2018). Analysis of Jenni’s story revealed that her basic psychological needs were mainly thwarted, especially during her first three years when living with the American family. It was interesting to note how differently she interpreted the meaning of “a string” that kept her “balloon” as a sign of protection from her father and then as a sign of restricted autonomy from her grandma and aunt. The “balloon” was “released” when she moved to the university in the other US city, but she was not ready to use the increased autonomy for her benefit and couldn’t establish and maintain meaningful relationships with other people or to be really successful in her studies and sport.

We think that at the core of Jenni’s transition processes was her identity crisis related to the lack of both personal resources and sociocultural support. It sounded like most often she didn’t trust people in her US surroundings, being suspicious they would not understand her, and even didn’t trust her parents to accept her when she was not adjusting well. Her diminished cultural resources and experiences limited Jenni’s meaning

reconstruction, which is one of the psychological mechanisms supporting successful cultural adaptation (Ryba et al., 2016). Jenni struggled to make sense of how Americans positioned her as black, telling her that she spoke like a black person while her American family made fun of her Scandinavian accent. Her life story was interspersed with the question “what does it mean?” in relation to many aspects of her experiences, to which she seldom received a meaningful answer (e.g., “you are just black”). It would appear that Jenni internalized her father’s African American self-narrative, and when her African American relatives did not accept her as one of them, she found herself in a paradox of meaning negotiation processes. For example, she tried to avoid being labeled “a girl from Scandinavia” but seemed to be suffering when saying, “everything Scandinavian was taken out of me”. This biographical rupture was perhaps the major ingredient of her identity crisis that diminished not only her cultural but also holistic adaptation (e.g., in sport, studies, social, and personal life). That is why she felt very much alone and forced to the “shouldered acculturation” path often associated with migrants’ marginalized ethnic identities and compromised mental health and well-being (e.g., Ryba et al., 2018, 2020; Schinke & McGannon, 2014). The cultural transition process is bigger than the identity transformations during the transition, but the latter (as Jenni’s case clearly confirmed) is one of the core issues influencing the transitional person’s resourcefulness, coping and successful or less successful outcomes.

Here, there are several lessons to learn from discussing an interplay between cultural adaptation and identity issues based on Jenni’s story. (a) Addressing identity issues should be at the heart of helping migrants with cultural adaptation. (b) In contrast to the typical content of identity development interventions promoted through the athlete career discourse (i.e., to prevent or deal with athletic identity foreclosure; see, e.g., Petitpas & France, 2010), practitioners working with migrants often have to deal with “unlocking” their marginalized (e.g., ethnic) identities. (c) To prevent the identity rupture experienced by Jenni, practitioners might also help migrant athletes to understand how identity dimensions intersect (e.g., what are esthetic ideals for an African American woman) and what discursive practices (e.g., playing in a multicultural team, having African American man as a boyfriend) might help to integrate and exercise various identity dimensions (Ronkainen et al., 2016a, 2016b; Ryba et al., 2018; Schinke et al., 2019). (d) In working with migrant’s environments, it is important to promote an autonomy supportive motivational climate complemented by “shared acculturation” strategies (e.g., opening up to diverse customs, meals, clothing, gender norms, language learning, religious practices, peer mentoring) as a basis for migrants’ integration in a culturally safe way (e.g., Ryba et al., 2020; Schinke & McGannon, 2014).

In summary, we found that a combination of the theoretical approaches implemented in our interpretations and analysis was useful in illuminating various aspects of the cultural transition process with the intersectionality of identity as its integrating focus. Who is a client as a person? What and how does the client tell about him/herself? How does the client communicate about relationships with, and involvement of, other people? These are key questions for a sport psychology practitioner within any intervention, and the cultural transition context in this case study helped to reveal genuine complexity of the self and identity transformations, as well as other people's role in this process. Significant others mainly labeled Jenni (e.g., "black", "Scandinavian girl", "good daughter" making family proud), but didn't make a good effort to understand her and "the hell" inside her. We wonder what would have been different in Jenni's life story if the people with whom she constructed it would be more caring, multi-culturally competent and supportive of Jenni? We leave the readers to consider and elaborate on this question.

### Author notes

To protect the participant's identity, we replaced the name of her home country by the name of the broader geographic region. For the same reason, here and across the paper we also used the pseudonym "Jenni", and we anonymized the places of her stay in the US.

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