Introduction

Association football is the sport that has generated the largest body of research on sport migration (Agergaard, 2008). The sport’s global reach is perhaps the main reason for this extensive interest in the ethnoscapes of football (Maguire, 1999). Due to its intersection with multiple cultures, association football has provided sport migration researchers with a range of issues around and spaces in which to conduct their research. Therefore, our aim in this chapter is to provide a brief review of selected key aspects of the existing, rich literature on sport migration in football. In doing so, we first outline the development of migration research in association football before moving to sketch the contours of the field that has emerged in the past decade. We consider research that has sought to illuminate the broad structures of football’s labour market system, specifically focusing on the patterns and mechanisms that are central in the waves of migration from Africa and the southern hemisphere to European leagues. We then provide observations on the emerging interest in women’s football, followed by a few challenges when conducting research in the area of football-related migrations before closing the chapter with a brief summary and directions for future research.

Developing the field

Since the early developments of sport migration research, academics seeking to analyse various aspects of the field have utilised association football as a frame of reference. Expanding on the general approaches to the field introduced by academics such as John Bale (1991) and Joseph Maguire (1988), sport migration researchers turned their attentions to football in the mid 1990s. There are several reasons why the 1990s should pique interest in the area of football migration. Among these are the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the Bosman ruling and the increased commercialisation of elite European football clubs. The economic as well as political failure of the countries of Sovietised Central and Eastern Europe opened up new general and sport migratory options and channels, which later become important migratory pipelines across Europe (Molnar, 2006, 2011). Furthermore, following the European Court of Justice’s ruling on Jean-Marc Bosman’s case in December 1995, players were able to take advantage of the freedom of movement for workers within EU countries (Gardiner and Welch, 2011). This
decision fundamentally altered the transfer of football players in Europe, as out-of-contract players could move to another club without a transfer fee being paid. Prior to the Bosman ruling, football players could only move to another club with the agreement of both clubs, which was called the ‘retain and transfer system’. Under this system, out-of-contract players were not allowed to sign for a different team unless a transfer fee had been paid or a free transfer had been granted.

Concomitant to the increased mobility of footballing labour was the commercialisation of Europe’s so-called ‘big five’ leagues (English Premier League, Ligue 1, Bundesliga, Serie A and La Liga), which accelerated significantly preceding the Bosman ruling. In their efforts to create robust, global commercial brands, clubs increased their efforts to search for marketable talent beyond their national boundaries (McGovern, 2002); clubs themselves began to gradually supersede national/regional federations (Lanfranchi and Taylor, 2001). Consequently, the freedom of movement associated with the Bosman ruling coalesced with clubs’ commercial interests to precipitate an exponential growth in footballing ethnoscapes throughout Europe.

Perhaps the first comprehensive anthology to clearly signal the emergence of a specific focus on labour migration in football was edited by John Bale and Joseph Maguire (1994), entitled The Global Sports Arena. In this edited book, chapters by Bromberger (1994), Lanfranchi (1994), Mason (1994) and Moorhouse (1994) draw attention to several prominent themes that shaped early insights into football labour migration. These themes include: concepts of pioneers, host and donor country concerns, push-and-pull factors, national identity-related questions, professionalism, scale of migration and families and migratory networks. Analyses of the above themes are carried out through mostly historical and secondary source examples of football migrations. Accordingly, these chapters provide the bedrock out of which our initial understanding of the specifics of migration in association football emerges. After this initial platform of predominantly historical documentation and consideration, migratory processes in association football were given increased attention, and, the field branched out into several key areas, which we will introduce below.

Patterns, typologies and motivations

Emerging from these initial observations – and in light of the ever increasing levels of migrants (Stead and Maguire, 2000) – the patterns and scale of football migrations became the centre of multiple studies. These investigations predominantly included macro-sociological analyses that focused on the scale and patterns of migration that occur between particular countries. For example, Maguire and Stead (1998) focused on the patterns of movement between donor and host regions with special emphasis placed on the European Union (EU). Within this research it was found that considerable levels of movement existed within the EU and the privileging nature of EU membership was a deciding factor in migratory processes. While the insights here signal towards the pertinence of wider societal factors – such as the status and reputations of leagues – how these patterns and networks are formed by the individual agencies was outside of the remit of the chapter. Similarly, macro-structural approaches have been adopted by other academics as well (e.g. Lanfranchi, 1994; Molnar, 2006, 2011; Poli and Besson, 2010) which have aided our understanding of the existing and shifting patterns of migrations, but have been limited in their consideration of the players’ agency. Consequently, analyses of this particular kind should be seen to quantify migration (Molnar and Maguire, 2008) through their reference to factors that can both inhibit and enable migrations.

By referring to particular local and regional structural issues that inhibit as well as enable migrations, focus is drawn from the players involved towards push-and-pull factors that may
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enable or hinder the movement of footballers between countries (Engh and Agergaard, 2013). This research trend has continued to focus on sporting networks and local/regional conditions specific to football migrants. For example, McGovern (2000, 2002) explores the work of patterns and illuminates the economic, social and political relationships that maintain these. In this area, McGovern (2002) looks to highlight networks that have enabled the import of foreign players to English football and the conditions that aided the emergence of such networks. Diverging in remit, McGovern focuses on a distinct network between Ireland and England through the concept of brawn drain (2000), moving to wider discrepancies between concepts of globalisation and internationalisation in relation to inbound migrations and English football (2002). Historical and social factors are considered as push-and-pull factors, along with ideas of cultural continuity and active recruitment. In so doing, the focus of this trend of research remains on the donor and host countries. By using concepts such as ‘brawn drain’ (McGovern, 2000), ‘globalisation’ (McGovern, 2002) and referring to EU membership (Maguire and Stead, 1998), the emphasis is implicitly on the effects for the countries and regions from and through which these athletes move. Thus, individual migrants are considered as units who are pushed and pulled between host and donor countries driven by specific conditions (Agergaard, 2008). Therefore, when observing migration from a macro-structural perspective, research of this type has the tendency to focus on the effects of the spaces to which athletes move as opposed to the personal, familial and social tensions that can be experienced in the pursuit of professional athletic careers (Carter, 2011).

In an attempt to address this micro-sociological deficit, motivational analyses, that resemble the work of Charles Tilly (1978) in relation to general migrations, began to emerge in an attempt to establish a basis for understanding migration via typologies. Pioneering this area in sport migration, the work of Joseph Maguire (1996, 1999) needs to be mentioned. Maguire created five categories to motivational differentials such as pioneers, mercenaries, settlers, nomads and returnees. Later, building on Maguire’s work, Magee and Sugden (2002) established a similar typology that introduced some new categories (e.g. ambitionist, expelled and exile) of football migrants driven by the foci of their research. Subsequently, Molnar and Maguire (2008) combined Tilly’s (1978) work with existing sport migration typologies to map the motivation profile of Hungarian footballers by introducing circular returnee and nomadic career categories. It is beyond the limits of this chapter to explore each of these typologies in detail; however, in drawing more extensively on athletes’ personal experiences these insights begin to shift the research away from the act of quantifying patterns of movement towards a greater understanding of how football players live through migratory processes. In other words, typologies more prominently present the athletes involved as active decision-makers in migratory processes (Maguire, 2011).

While typological constructions help move beyond pure macro-structural analyses, the nature of constructing typologies also means that the narratives of the individuals involved are still reduced to somewhat rigid, and often overlapping, categories. This is resultant from the dynamics that shape the patterns and networks – push-and-pull factors – discussed in the previously mentioned literature. The porosity of such categories also needs to be considered. As Remund (2010) suggests, typological classifications have the tendency to open up more contradictions than the clarity of their categorisation would indicate. Therefore, we may also ponder on: to what extent do these categories overlap? Are the categories sufficiently clear that distinct differences emerge or are there aspects of migratory behaviour that, at different times, could apply to the same migrant? That is, athletes may fit in different categories as their career progresses/declines or may feature characteristics that overlap existing types of migrants. Thus, the porosity of these categories can render migration typologies somewhat time and space bound, calling for continuous re-examination.
As the field became more established, an increasing interest in widening the scope of research areas, directions and methods began to surface. In so doing, the predominantly Europe-centric nature of sport migratory research became more inclusive and academics such as Paul Darby and Raffaele Poli began developing their focus, paying particular attention to West African migration to Europe’s leagues. This focus led to the exploration of specific global dynamics inherent in migratory systems of football. Though the majority of the following section considers the movement of African players in the global south to European leagues in the global north, it is worth noting that related migratory observations also extend to the movement of players from South and Central America around the globe (see de Vasconcellos Ribeiro and Dimeo, 2009; Rial, 2012, 2015).

**South to North**

The waves of migration involved in the movement of African footballers are historically situated with ties to wider migrations and changing social demographics. Research into the migration of African footballers was driven by an increased number of African athletes accepting professional contracts in Europe from the mid-1990s (Poli, 2006a). The increasing focus on Africa following this period coincided with a number of high-profile players competing in Europe (Wycliffe, 2014), the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa (Darby and Solberg, 2010; Steinbrink, 2010) and the FIFA President’s, Joseph Blatter, outspoken comments concerning the plundering of African players by European clubs (Darby, 2007) to further his own political ambitions (Esson, 2015).

Though footballers continue to play at both professional and semi-professional levels in a number of countries, the majority of players appear to be drawn to Europe for multiple reasons (Darby, 2010). The players featuring in European leagues can be professionals seeking contracts or second-generation migrants whose families have previously moved to the country. This situation is particularly significant in the former colonial powers of Western Europe (Lanfranchi and Taylor, 2001; Poli, 2006b). For example, French football often features a number of players with backgrounds in former colonial countries such as Algeria, Cameroon and the Ivory Coast (Frenkiel and Bancel, 2008), which exposes further dynamics involved in sport migration systems and their connections to other forms of migration.

This situation indicates a series of push-and-pull factors simultaneously at play for footballers migrating from Africa to pursue a professional career. Chiefly among the push factors is the underdeveloped nature of professional football in many African nations (Darby and Solberg, 2010; Lanfranchi and Taylor, 2001). Despite this infrastructural underdevelopment, the sport is frequently cited among the most popular (Darby and Solberg, 2010; Darby, 2010), which indicates that there is a substantial talent pool. For those participating in association football, opportunities to ‘go outside’ (Darby, 2010) can be sought as a reaction to the inability to forge a professional career closer to home. Poli’s (2010b) focus on African football migration supports this notion and highlights the opportunities a professional footballing career can provide for individuals from African nations. Poli refers to the example of former Chelsea and Real Madrid footballer Michael Essien, among others, and discusses how they are able to utilise their talents in order to avoid being curbed by the restricted opportunities at their place of birth; thus, they choose to ‘go outside’.

With regard to pull factors, the expansion of professional clubs’ ambitions outlined in the previous section have created a plethora of opportunities for players to pursue. Despite these opportunities, the expansion of these ambitions has led to further concerns regarding the exploitative nature of the relationships between elite clubs and African players. The establishment
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of football academies are an area where these particular tensions have developed (Darby et al., 2007). Similar to the expansion of other sources of labour, the cognitive, physical, and technical skills required by those aspiring to a professional career in association football are developed through imbricated stages of education and experiential learning. Football academies are therefore the bridgehead in the development of becoming a professional footballer (Darby, 2012).

The tensions associated with this stage and the one beyond in the professional field are manifold between host and donor countries, the commercialised leagues and clubs and the players themselves. From an academic perspective, these movements are frequently judged from macro-structural perspectives such as Global Value Chains (Darby, 2013) and World System Theory (Poli, 2010b). In so doing, there can be a pessimistic reading of such movements whereby the process is considered as little more than the siphoning off of valuable resources from Africa, which further perpetuates a level of global inequality and damaging sociocultural effects in donor countries (Darby, 2012). While the unequal nature of migratory networks should not simply be discounted in favour of alternative theoretical narratives, there have been recent attempts to reconcile the systemic potential for exploitation with the individual ambitions of those wishing to pursue professional football as a career path.

Considering this point, the harsh realities of football migration are often associated with commercial factors that push many players away from the game (Poli, 2010a). Structural considerations such as these often frame the movement from Africa to pursue a professional career as a risky enterprise. As Esson (2015) suggests, the ‘better off at home’ argument frames migrants in terms of structural systems whereby they are exploited or disposed of without any means of survival. The trafficked and exploitative nature of some experiences are therefore considered detrimental. Conversely, the ambitions of the players involved can lead them to see their country of origin as a place they do not wish to return and, as a result, they avoid homecoming despite potential hardships in the host country. These situations can encourage (former) players to stay in their destination countries in precarious situations in order to avoid returning home (Esson, 2015). Consequently, by focusing on the migrant players more explicitly, further dynamics of the football migration experience can be unfolded. Dynamics, such as the one observed by Esson (2015), help challenge previously held assumptions concerning the migratory systems involved.

When exploring these dynamics further, it is clear that family also plays an important role. Therefore, it is pertinent to note that athletes do not migrate in isolation, but as part of historical and social systems of which family is part (Carter, 2011). This is particularly relevant in the early stages of careers as players often need significant help and approval to pursue their ambitions. In positioning the role of family as such, Van der Meij and Darby (2015) have demonstrated both the supportive and hindering role of social actors in the pursuit of professional sporting achievements. It is therefore apparent that focusing on African athletes’ own experiences and responses has broadened the literature from push-and-pull factors to that which can presuppose these experiences.

Another chief feature of the existing literature on football-related migrations has been the predominant focus on male football players. It has only been recently that interest in women’s football and related migrations has began to attract academic attention. In the following section of the chapter, we will pay some attention to this emerging area.

**Women’s football**

Throughout this chapter we have presented literature and issues pertaining to association football migrations from the perspective of one particular group of people: men. Specifically, insights and
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experiences reviewed so far have been drawn from male athletes. This male centrism is indicative of the sport migration literature (Agergaard and Ryba, 2014) and is illustrative of the ways in which female football players’ experiences have been marginalised or ignored. That is, research’s marginalisation of women’s experiences have rendered issues inherent in women’s football migrations underexplored (Engh and Agergaard, 2013). This situation has persisted despite a tradition of migration stretching back to the early stages of female association football (Botelho and Agergaard, 2011). From a research perspective, the general attitude towards women football players has been that they are much less affected by the phenomenon of migration in comparison to their male counterparts (Poli, 2006b). This outlook is concomitant with the broader (society-wide) gendered perspective that suggests importance should be placed on concerns of and revolving around men. Therefore, until recently research with aims to explore women football players’ experiences of migration have largely been absent (Agergaard et al., 2013).

In order to address this scientific lacuna, researchers have begun to expand on the processes involved in a concerted effort to focus on the migrations involved in women’s football (see Agergaard and Botelho, 2013; Agergaard and Ryba, 2014; Botelho and Agergaard, 2011; Botelho and Skogvang, 2013; Engh et al., 2014; Engh and Agergaard, 2013; McCormack and Walseth, 2013). In particular research has honed in on migrations involving several host spaces that might be deemed peripheral in men’s football. Specifically, there is growing interest in players migrating from Africa to Scandinavia (Agergaard and Botelho, 2014; Botelho and Agergaard, 2011; Engh et al., 2013; Agergaard and Agergaard, 2013). These theoretical insights include processes of transnationalism (Agergaard and Ryba, 2014) through specifics such as mobility, locality and visibility (Engh and Agergaard, 2013). Elias’s Established/Outsiders (Engh et al., 2013) has also been applied in an attempt to encapsulate processes at the heart of women’s football migrations in relation to tournaments and the organisational divide between Africa and Scandinavia. Additionally, concepts such as Friedson’s Labour of Love (Botelho and Agergaard, 2011) have been employed in an effort to help support understanding of female athletes’ motivations. Consequently, questions concerning not only host and donor countries, but also those probing the experiences, identities and gender of the players involved have begun to be addressed.

Focusing on both the macro- and micro-structural issues involved in female players’ migrations are an important aspect of developing knowledge in the area. The marginalisation of women’s association football has created the potential for a number of structural issues that drive a lack of coordination and organisation (Darby and Solberg, 2010). The way in which sporting migrations function through series of formal and informal connections (Engh and Agergaard, 2013) indicate that the lack of coordination and organisation in women’s association football is potentially disruptive to those seeking opportunities away from home. This lack of coordination has positioned Scandinavia and North America as hubs for women players seeking to continue their footballing career (Agergaard and Botelho, 2014; Engh et al., 2013). The prevalence of
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these spaces has been established over a number of years to position Scandinavia and North American football at the forefront of both receiving and sending female football players (Botelho and Skogvang, 2013; Harris, 2015).

In North America, the dominant position of American football as a male preserve has created spaces where soccer has been able to endure and flourish without specious claims and slurs involving masculinity and gender ideologies that have hindered the development of women’s association football elsewhere (Harris, 2015). Educational institutions play an important role in establishing and supporting players’ footballing ambitions, with schools and colleges offering scholarships and athletic opportunities to players both from North America and beyond (Agergaard and Ryba, 2014). Establishing post-career opportunities is particularly important in turbulent careers that can end prematurely (Butt and Molnar, 2009). Scholarships and educational opportunities are important in this regard as they enable players to enhance their physical and educational abilities, which, in turn, can help to establish careers both in and beyond association football (McCormack and Walseth, 2013). Subsequently, focusing on footballing migrations to and from North America provides insights into the way in which these careers are established and the way in which players begin forming their professional careers.

By exploring women’s football, the research presented here has further developed earlier insights into football migrations and expanded them into new areas. The growth of professional and semi-professional opportunities continues (McCormack and Walseth, 2013), and as it does, so will the levels of migration and the experiences of players pursuing careers away from home. By illuminating the role of education systems and the establishment of different centres at the heart of women’s football migrations, research currently shows that women’s football migrations include a series of issues involving not only economics, but also issues of gender and identity that are less prevalent in discussions of men’s football migrations. However, as the game itself continues to expand, further spaces and issues may need to be attended to.

As with any research, the topic of migration brings to the fore its own challenges. As academics looking to continue to expand the horizons of migration research, it is important to be aware of the challenges that can befall researchers. The following section outlines a few of the challenges we think are pertinent for researchers in the early stages of developing research in the area.

Potential research challenges

Access is an essential part of conducting social research. When seeking to meet research aims with specific professional athletes, for example, the problem of access is often magnified and researchers can find themselves beholden to the many layers of organisation and bureaucracy involved in professional sporting associations. As football increasingly commodifies its players, access has become a salient issue with clubs unlikely to want to expose players to academic scrutiny that might reflect negatively on the dynamics inherent in professional football migrations. When coupled with the increased level of media training offered to players, particularly at elite level, professional players are increasingly difficult to access.

One of the ways in which problem of access may be overcome is through pre-existing contacts. For those working in the field of sport – such as Magee and Sugden (2002) – accessing the professional sporting environment is encountered through their previous participation and ingratiation in the sport. As Magee and Sugden (2002: 423) outline:

given that one of the authors had been a Northern Ireland Under-21 international, initial access into the world of professional football was relatively easy. Former playing
colleagues, coaches, and managers who had direct or indirect contacts with senior professional clubs helped to facilitate the initial stages of this research. This type of investigation adopted a friend-of-a-friend strategy.

Thus, their status and contacts in this environment provided opportunities leading to the so-called snowball effect. In order to overcome such challenges it is potentially necessary to make contact with a gatekeeper (Silk, 2005) who can add credence to a researcher’s aims and ambitions.

In lieu of having a gatekeeper, it might also be helpful to establish common ground with migrant players to gain their trust and produce rich data. For instance, Molnar (2010) argued that his migrant status helped in gaining participants’ trust and, thus, deep insights into their migratory experiences, including particularly some sensitive, personal information and sometimes painful memories. Molnar (2010) observed that during the data collection phase of his research participants often alluded to the ‘common ground’ they identified between them and him. Participants often made statements such as: ‘But you know yourself how it is’; ‘I am sure you have had the same issues living in England’; and ‘I don’t think I need to tell you if you have lived abroad for so long’. Consequently, interviewees opened up easier and often went into great depth in sharing migration-related personal information. Molnar realised the advantage his migrant status gave him during the course of conducting interviews, including the potential significance of connecting with migrant participants on the level of common experiences. Consequently, he argued that the cultural capital accumulated through shared identities as and with migrants was relevant to his research, without which he could not have produced the desired richness of data, showing insight into the personal feelings and struggles of migrant Hungarian footballers.

Another potential challenge to consider in accessing participants is the issue of language. Despite English being the lingua franca, not all migrants possess a good command of it. Some migrant players simply learn those words and expressions which are essential for their daily functioning as footballers and never go beyond that level. This might be a particularly relevant issue to consider with regard to specific player populations such as Central and Eastern Europeans. Here consideration should be given to the following: conducting interviews with athletes whose native language is other than English or conducting interviews in a language other than English and then translating the verbal data back to the language of publication. These aspects of data generation have not been extensively discussed in the existing literature. Therefore, we would argue that to be able to tease out the subtleties of migratory experiences where the language of communication is a concern, specific methodological steps should be adopted and reflected on driven by the skills of the researcher and participant population. For instance, it would be crucial for the researcher conducting interviews in a foreign language to be familiar with not only the written/formal forms of the language in use, but also the colloquial forms, which is more likely to be used by the participants. Bryman observes, that ‘it is not simply the formal language that must be understood [but] … it is also very often the “argot” – the special uses of words and slang that are important to penetrate that culture’ (2001: 328). Without that specific local or regional knowledge, which is a mixture of language and culture, we may wonder to what extent the delicacy of data generation has been successful. We believe that this aspect of conducting research will be of particular importance as the boundaries of sport migration research expands.

Summary

In the foregoing discussion, we introduced some of the key literature associated with the field of football migrations. We outlined initial research areas and approaches predominantly focusing
on socio-historical and macro-structural methods. These preliminary studies were then followed by a more extensive and in-depth second wave of migratory literature. This second wave addressed some of the limitations of the pioneers of the area and, thus, devoted more attention to the subtleties of migratory processes and agencies bound up in them, along with generating critical primary data. Nevertheless, some of the micro-structural intricacies of migratory processes remained only partially explored by the researchers of the second wave. Consequently, more recent research strands exploring football migrations have developed a tendency to concentrate on athletes’ lived experiences and provide a platform for their voices. Here we paid particular heed to the literature investigating athletes moving from the global south to the global north. We outlined main strands, approaches, push-and-pull factors and some exploitative relations between the global north and south.

While reviewing the relevant literature, we arrived at the conclusion that, perhaps, one of the most significant lacunae in the past and present migratory research was created by their exclusive focus on men. To bridge this gap, a recent thread of investigation has made significant headway into exploring women footballers’ migratory patterns and experiences. Current research showed that women’s football migrations include a series of issues involving not only economics, but of gender and identity as well. While women-centred migratory research is developing into a vibrant research strand, there is plenty of room for future studies in so far uncharted destinations.

In addition to women’s football and a few potential research challenges we detailed in the penultimate section of the chapter, future migratory research revolving around football may have the need to gain inspiration from areas outside of sport studies and explore novel spaces. As football and migration research continues to develop, we expect to see new horizons rising. These may include the following: as the professionalisation of leagues in the United States and Australia continue apace, the influx of foreign talent will make a significant mark on the domestic leagues. These leagues already attract some high-profile athletes from Europe and further expansions may be possible in the not-so-distant future. In addition, there is an ever increasing prominence of Asia-Pacific countries and their players in sports and related migrations. Some of these countries may appear lucrative destinations for European athletes but with significant cultural differences. For instance, the ever increasing global popularity of the J league may attract more foreign players to Japan in the future and migratory trends already observable in rugby will become part and parcel of football as well. Additionally, Russia’s growing presence in hosting international sporting events will have an effect on migration trends. However, the country has questionable human rights records and is openly racist and homophobic. Nevertheless, the country may appear attractive to South American and African players whose experience as foreign talent would yield rich insight to the local culture and football alike.

In addition to investigating successful migrants, we believe there is a pressing need to explore and understand what happens to players who do not make it. As there is an extensive and ever expanding global talent pool but only limited job opportunities to be filled, we should develop more research questions that revolve around athletes who do not make the cut. Would they opt to go back to their home country or attempt to make a life in their host environment despite potential hostilities? How would they cope with the challenges of life in a foreign country without the protective bubble of professional football? That is, despite the extensive coverage of currently available academic literature on football migration, there are plenty of new issues as well as re-emerging ones for the next wave of researchers to tackle in the era of accelerated ethnoscapes and globalisations.
1 Although primarily referred to by advertisers and journalists trying to glamorise the sport, the ‘big five’ is a term often cited in academic work (see Littlewood et al., 2011).

References

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