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## Women academics' ambivalent experiences of singlehood and international mobility

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the lived experiences of nine women scholars who are single, childfree and internationally mobile. Mobilising Laurent Berlant's work on ambivalence and 'cruel optimism,' we show how experiences of singlehood and academic international mobility are never only good or bad, but always both at the same time. Ambivalence emerges in the women's experiences because singlehood can facilitate academic careers by enabling high productivity and mobility, whereas mobility can inhibit finding committed relationships through an absence of stability and prevalent gendered expectations of women in heterosexual relationships. Most of the interviewed women hope for a life which has both careers, mobility and romantic relationships, however, the simultaneity of benefits and struggles associated with singlehood and a mobile academic life places them in an ambivalent situation that precludes the option of letting go of either of their affective attachments, namely, to gendered couple norms and the academic institution.

### Towards ambivalent accounts of single lives

Scholarship has long treated singlehood as an epiphenomenon of marriage, coupledness and family. Recently, DePaulo (2017) strongly urged for the need for a 'singles studies discipline' arguing that existing research has so far too uncritically positioned singles as a monolithic category marked by failure. Scholarship, DePaulo (2017, 2023) says, needs to take singlehood at the centre of analysis and bring forth the nuances of single lives. As singlehood is a growing form of living globally (Adamczyk & Trepanowski, 2023; Kislev, 2019), there is a need for more research exploring the experiences and socio-cultural conditions of singlehood and, not least, how they differ intersectionally (Kislev & Marsh, 2023) and across different institutional settings such as academia.

International mobility is widely regarded as essential to academic career success (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017; Herschberg, Benschop, & van den Brink, 2018). This view has been normalised by the increasing competition for academic jobs (Rumbley & de Wit, 2017) and is reinforced by beliefs in its inherent benefits (skills, social capital) (e.g., Bauder, 2020; Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017). International mobility, however, is not equally available to all. The fact that single, childfree women researchers are generally more internationally mobile than their

coupled counterparts who are mothers (Leemann, 2010; Uhly, Visser, & Zippel, 2017) presumably makes being single and childfree an advantage. Furthermore, the considerable scientific attention given to heterosexual couples navigating mobility (e.g., Schaer, Dahinden, & Toader, 2017; Schittenhelm, 2022; Vohlídalová, 2017) and the simultaneous dearth of studies on single scholars suggest an assumption that mobility, for them, must be easy. In this article, we instead approach this assumption as an open question to study.

DePaulo (2023) poignantly argues that single lives are too often diminished to deficit narratives, including singles as lacking and ceaselessly waiting (Lahad, 2017). Factors that are key to singles' happiness are their autonomy, interests, work, travelling, and cherishing solitude (Kislev, 2023). Singles further live meaningful lives by engaging in personal development, caring for family, and nurturing many friendships (DePaulo, 2023). Although we agree with DePaulo (2023) that more stories of flourishing singles are needed, an exclusively positive view of singlehood can be equally reductive. The research showing that singles encounter structural barriers to, for instance, access to affordable housing (Bhargava & Chilana, 2020), as well as stigma and everyday social exclusions cannot be ignored (e.g., Budgeon, 2016; Lahad, 2017).

Drawing on nine in-depth interviews (Legard, Keegan, & Ward,

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2003) with internationally mobile, single, childfree women academics and on the analytical notion of ambivalence (Berlant, 2011, 2022), this article aims to move beyond either/or accounts of single lives. We focus on women because, as noted by Murgia and Poggio (2018), their careers in research continue to be comparatively more precarious, women scholars are more likely to be single (Culpepper, Lennartz, O'Meara, & Kuvaeva, 2020), and women experience greater stigma associated with singlehood than men do (Budgeon, 2016; Kislev, 2023). We show how the women's experiences of singlehood and international mobility are deeply enmeshed and are never only good or bad but always simultaneously both. In doing so, the article contributes to two strands of literature; singlehood and academic international mobility. The article moves the discussion of singlehood forward by illustrating how positive and negative affective orientations are mutually constitutive. It further shows how women's experiences are shaped within academic institutional life. This way, it adds to the international mobility literature by studying a generally overlooked population – single, childfree women. The article proceeds by situating the article in these two literatures.

### Singlehood, gender and work

We follow Kislev's (2023) conceptualisation of singlehood as a social identity that is continually shaped by 'symbolic relationships between the individual and the social world' (p. 3) affecting how singles view themselves and how others perceive and treat singles. 'The social world' here includes social norms (Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, Santos, & Stoilova, 2020), power relations embedded in institutions, such as the academy (Culpepper et al., 2020; Hill, 2020), and not least systemic intersectional inequalities (Kislev & Marsh, 2023). While colloquially singlehood refers to not being in a relationship, there are significant disparities between diverse groups who comply with this definition, for example, divorcees, single parents, serially monogamous people, versus life-long singles (Gilchrist, 2022; Lahad, 2017). Much research makes binary distinctions between 'singles by choice' and 'by circumstance,' or singles' independence or relationship orientation. However, Kislev (2023) stresses that such dichotomies are under constant negotiation. One can, for instance, identify as single while in a relationship (Felder & Machia, 2023), making it clear that a simplistic understanding of singlehood does not suffice.

Women seem to be subjected to singlehood's stigma and myths more than men (e.g., Kislev, 2023). Budgeon (2016) argues that 'women experience greater pressure to conform to the ideology' (p. 404) of marriage and motherhood because they enable successful performances of conventional femininity. Women who live their lives otherwise, for example by building careers, are therefore often socially required to justify it (Lahad, 2017). Consistent reminders that single women are living 'non-conforming' lives, are selfish, immature, and not 'living up to their families' expectations' (Kislev, 2023, p. 10) may unsurprisingly produce guilt and anxiety. Singlehood and professional ambition, thus, become gender-transgressive behaviours that socially render single women 'undateable' (Gilchrist, 2022) and pitiable (Kolehmainen, Lahti, & Kinnunen, 2023). Experiences of singlehood also intersect with age in significant ways. When single women move into so-called 'late singlehood,' 30–35 years of age, when coupledom supposedly 'should have happened' (Kislev, 2023, p. 17), singlehood increasingly becomes seen as a result of personal defects. At this point, the single woman is seen as 'too choosy' (Budgeon, 2016) and 'too demanding' (Kolehmainen et al., 2023), and her hopes for coupledom diminish as 'the number of eligible men' has now dwindled (Kislev, 2023, p. 11).

Such dominant cultural myths of personal defects and shattered hopes are not reflective of the realities of singlehood. As listed above, singles' lives are rich, exciting and meaningful, and work can play a central role in singles' happiness (DePaulo, 2023; Kislev, 2024). Through work, singles can actualize their capabilities, build self-worth, and ensure their freedom, which may even lead them to pursue less secure career paths (Kislev, 2023). Some professionals also intentionally stay

single so that they can fully invest in their careers which, however, comes with the risk that if they lose their jobs, they may also lose their sense of self to some degree (Ibid.). A second and well-documented downside to single people's dedication to work concerns their work-life balance. The fact that work-life balance policies in organisations tend more accurately to concern work-child care balance shows how workplaces are seldom 'single-friendly' (Casper, Weltman, & Kwesiga, 2007). Furthermore, much research confirms how singles are often expected to assist with or take over tasks for colleagues who are parents, enabling their work-care balance (Ibid.; Kislev, 2024) which, for women, due to gendered 'likeability' expectations, may be additionally difficult to refuse (Gao, Sai, & Xu, 2024). Kislev (2024) finally adds that it may be particularly challenging for unmarried professional women to get involved in or grow new romantic relationships 'when they are consistently asked to work late' (p. 145).

### Academic careers and international mobility

International mobility has always been an integral part of science, however, mobility requirements have intensified due to universities' strategic internationalisation goals and competition for researcher talents (Rumbley & de Wit, 2017). Although mobility expectations differ between scientific fields, mobility is normalised as key to academic career success (Sautier, 2021) and may serve as a selection criterion in hiring processes (Herschberg et al., 2018). This article takes international mobility to encompass both going to academic conferences, short-term visiting scholar stints, as well as essentially migration. Migration here refers to cross-border moves for a period lasting over a year, for example, full-degree PhDs, fixed-term postdocs, and tenured faculty positions (Bauder, 2020; Rostan & Höhle, 2014).

While for some, international mobility may be motivated by a wish for adventure, for most scholars, mobility is inevitable due to macro-level inequalities such as differences in pay, opportunity and living standards globally (Cantwell, 2011). Widely accepted benefits of mobility are reputational 'capital', knowledge exchange, intercultural skills, and international networks (Bauder, 2020; Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017). On the flipside, Cantwell (2011) argues that some recruiters in academia see international postdocs as 'term workers who fill immediate labour needs' (p. 430), whereby the option of subsequent contracts is almost ruled out in advance. Research also finds that mobility is linked with a loss of key networks in the home country, which may lead to mobile scholars becoming 'stuck' in the country to which they have moved (Pustelnikovaite, 2021).

An extensive body of literature shows that women are not as internationally mobile as men (Leemann, 2010; Rostan & Höhle, 2014; Uhly et al., 2017) which is typically explained through motherhood (Sautier, 2021) and shows the risk of conflating 'women' with women in heterosexual partnerships with children. As single and childfree academics, including women, are found to be more likely than their coupled counterparts to be mobile (Leemann, 2010; Uhly et al., 2017), singlehood is presented as an advantage that is left unexplored. In addition to studies on women's (limited) access to international mobility, other research focuses on women's experiences while internationally mobile. Strauß and Boncori (2020), for instance, show how the 'liquidity' or in-built temporariness of working in academia lead women mobile scholars to internalise the need to become hyper-productive leaving them uniquely vulnerable to exploitation. Hyper-productivity, unsurprisingly, exacts 'overwhelming demands on time, effort, relationships and workloads' that are 'neither reasonable nor sustainable' (Ibid. p. 1015). Relationships here, as is common, refer to nuclear family life and child rearing.

Except for Shevtsova (2023), no studies have yet investigated how international mobility shapes single scholars' personal lives and relationships, including dating, while internationally mobile. In fact, very few studies have linked singlehood with the academic context at all. Hill (2020) is among the exceptions who shows how US-based doctoral

students strategically choose singlehood to demonstrate commitment to their academic work. Culpepper et al. (2020), moreover, show that women associate professors at a US university experienced the least agency in affecting their work-life balance of the sample studied. In sum, clearly there is a need for a deeper understanding of how academic careers shape scholars' (private and/or love) lives and vice versa.

### Ambivalence as analytical lens to study singlehood and international mobility

We engage Lauren Berlant's writing (2011, 2022) to analyse the interviewees' experiences of singlehood and academic international mobility. When reading our interview material with self-identified single, mobile women scholars, our aim is to foreground the complexity behind their narratives of singlehood and academic career trajectories. We centre our analysis on the ambivalence of single lives in order not to explain away such experiences as neither only negative (difficult, frustrating) nor positive (joyful, empowering). As argued above, one stream of singlehood research generally highlights the positive aspects of single lives, celebrating them as expressions of freedom (e.g., DePaulo, 2023). The other stream focuses on the negative aspects, such as stigmatisation, loneliness, and structural constraints (Bhargava & Chilana, 2020; Roseneil et al., 2020). Our aim, however, is to highlight that single lives are not solely one or the other. Specifically, we want to show how the experienced possibilities and constraints are affectively entangled with one another. Consequently, we follow Dango and Post (2022) who argued that ambivalent affects are not just multiple or co-present, but rather co-constitutive, and simultaneously emergent.

Ambivalence has been implicitly and explicitly at the centre of feminist writing and theorising (Dango & Post, 2022), as a way to articulate the contradictory affects and positions towards the attachments to homogeneous power relations, and aspirations to resist and break through the power structures. We build on the notion of ambivalence situated in feminist studies, specifically Berlant's writing on 'Cruel Optimism' (Berlant, 2011), but also in more recent work in 'On the inconvenience of other people' (Berlant, 2022). Berlant discusses ambivalence in 'Cruel Optimism', the term referring to affective attachments to situations or objects that can be desirable but also detrimental to wellbeing. Cruel optimism is when individuals invest in a particular idea or aspiration, believing it will bring them happiness or fulfilment, even though it may ultimately be unattainable or counter-productive. Such attachments can lead to ambivalence, as people simultaneously desire and are harmed by the object of their attachment. In Berlant's definition, ambivalence is a position in which

'we want and we don't want what we want. Or we want parts but not wholes and resent the added freight. Or we're averse to what we're attached to but can perform neither a reconciliation nor a cleavage. It can be a dramatic state but it's also likely to be a mess of loose live wires that it's hard to put a finger on' (Berlant, 2022, p. 36).

This way, Berlant encourages us to think of ambivalence 'as being strongly mixed, drawn in many directions, positively and negatively charged' (Berlant, 2022, p. 27) which suggests a double-bind position as 'yes' and 'no' orientations towards the object coexist at the same time, rather than exist separately.

As ambivalence may colloquially carry negative connotations, implying the presence of mixed emotions and feelings, we must recognize that ambivalence is an affective orientation (Ahmed, 2004, 2010) to the situation, object or phenomenon at hand. Here, queer phenomenology's take on affect as an energy and intensity that positions the body's capacity to affect and be affected (Cvetkovich, 2012) is helpful in pointing us to ways that ambivalence can become an intensity and energy that informs people's understandings and ways of being. Importantly, ambivalence does not solely suggest an internal affective state. As Dango and Post (2022) put it, "So, too, might ambivalence be 'foundational' for all subjects, but it is intensified for the subject whose precarity

is produced by structural harm" (no page number). Thus, we look at how the ambivalence towards singlehood and international mobility is entangled with the power regimes of gender, heteronormative coupledom, and the academic institution.

### Method

This article is based on nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Legard et al., 2003). The strength of in-depth interviewing is its ability to fully explore 'all the factors that underpin the participants' answers: reasons, feelings, opinions and beliefs' (Ibid. p. 141). By using a variety of questioning approaches, the method reveals the breadth of issues relevant to the interviewees, as well as depth, namely, the meanings the uncovered issues hold to them (Legard et al., 2003). The interview guide was structured into four principal question categories. The main question of the 'meanings of singlehood' category was 'What does being single mean to you?' which immediately directed our attention towards ambivalence since many answers concerned the simultaneity of, for example, freedom and stigma. The 'singlehood and time' category captured especially the intersection between gender, singlehood and age, whereas the 'singlehood and space' category addressed how (experiences of) singlehood are shaped by contexts, such as private/public settings but also different countries and cultures. Finally, the 'singlehood, work and mobility' category tapped into how academic work and mobility had affected the interviewees' personal lives, in particular dating and relationships, and conversely how being single had affected the interviewees' academic careers. The interviews were all done in English and online because the authors and interviewees are all located in different countries. They lasted approximately an hour.

To reiterate, the article focuses on women academics because they remain more precarious in research careers, are more likely to be single, and suffer more stigma relating to singlehood than men (Budgeon, 2016; Culpepper et al., 2020; Murgia & Poggio, 2018). To recruit our nine interviewees, we combined a 'snowball' approach (starting in our personal networks) with an open call for participants using social media. Our sample is thus purposive based on self-selection, in which potential interviewees judged their relevance based on the criteria of a) being a single and childfree woman; b) being an academic (incl., PhDs) and; c) being or having previously been internationally mobile in relation to their academic career trajectory. Self-selection and the fact that one may identify as single even while in a relationship (Felder & Machia, 2023) explain why two participants were in new relationships at the time of the interview. Additionally, all interview participants were ciswomen.

The research has received ethical approval from Radboud University. In addition to the interviews conducted specifically for this study, we include two interviews and one follow-up interview that Vertelyte conducted as part of the project 'Affective investments in diversity work in STEM at Danish universities'<sup>1</sup>. All interviewees gave formal consent in writing prior to and orally at the start of the interviews. The combination of empirical material from different projects need not be a limitation as our objective is not comparative. Rather, it may contribute to ensuring that the themes of interest were unfolded in multifaceted ways, allowing for strengthening the 'rich rigour' of the research (Tracy, 2010).

Our exploration of the ambivalences of singlehood and international mobility emerged from a close reading of the interviews. As we delved into the transcripts, we began to notice how the narratives of our interviewees often portrayed an ambivalent experience. Ambivalences were evident in the ways our interviewees used language. For example, they often employed linguistic expressions such as 'on one hand and on the other hand' or 'I am happy and at the same time I am stressed,' 'maybe,' 'perhaps,' among others. These expressions not only indicated

<sup>1</sup> Diversity work in STEM (au.dk), The Project Funded by AUFF NOVA Foundation

the interviewees' hesitance to adhere to one narrative but also alluded to tensions and mixed feelings towards their single and internationally mobile status. Although there were differences in the felt intensities of these ambivalences among the interviewed women, they all expressed some kind of ambivalence. We selected quotes and narratives to include in this article based on the 'authenticity principle' ensuring that selected quotes are both illustrative of the patterns in the empirical material and effectively succinct (Lingard, 2019). As such, below, we show three overarching ambivalent tensions present across the interview material: namely the ambivalence of being free and constrained, flexible and overburdened, and being ahead and lagging behind.

### Empirical sample

Our sample of women, who have all been given pseudonyms, makes it evident that singlehood and international mobility can look very different in different life histories. To ensure the participants' anonymity, we present the following information narratively. The women range from their early 30s to late 40s, and the sample therefore includes early-career researchers (incl., PhD candidates) as well as tenured scholars. Academically, the women work across health and social science, and the STEM fields, across universities in different Western, mostly European, countries.

Some of the women were first mobile during their undergraduate studies; others have moved multiple times to obtain PhD or postdoc positions. Several are 'Global South' researchers working in Northern Europe; two have moved from Southern to North-Western Europe, and one has moved from Eastern to Western Europe. One researcher, when interviewed, was a visiting scholar in the United States. Two interviewees have two homes, one in their home country and one in the country where they work. A few came to be mobile as a positive, proactive choice, whereas most of the interviewees accepted mobility out of need or to be closer to former romantic partners.

All but two of the interviewees were single when interviewed; however, those two had also experienced periods of singlehood spanning several years. Some of the interviewees were actively dating, some to meet casual flings, but most with a wish to find committed relationships. Most of the interviewees are heterosexual, with one identifying as bisexual. Most of the interviewees had committed relationships for several years (2–7 years) in the past, and one was previously married. A couple of the interviewees were newly single; others were long-term singles.

Lastly, all interviewees are childfree. For a few of the interviewees, their desire for heteronormative coupledom is intertwined with a desire to become mothers, while several of our interviewees have no intention of having children. One interviewee went through a tough and ultimately unsuccessful process of attempting to have a baby. The fact that we, in the article, analytically foreground singlehood over being childfree is a result of how the interview dialogues played out.

### Analysis

#### *Ambivalence of being free and constrained*

Ambivalent tensions surfaced in the interviews as the women discussed their career histories and prospects linked with international mobility, alongside their aspirations and desires for their private lives. These ambivalent tensions were particularly salient in the simultaneity of freedom and constraint associated with both singlehood and academic careers.

For our interviewees, romantic relationships are seen as a time investment that clashes with the pursuit of an academic career (Hill, 2020; Kislev, 2024). Being in a romantic relationship does not align with, especially, the mobility required by such careers (Shevtsova, 2023). For example, Alice, a postdoc who relocated from the US to Northern Europe for her current job and previously held two other postdocs elsewhere in

Europe, reflects on the evolving conditions for early-career scholars and the constraints such conditions pose on her personal life:

For my supervisor's generation, [being] away was for 2 years or 3 years max. These days you're spending 10 years, the prime time of your life, between 25 and 35 or 40, hopping around doing postdocs. I'm single so I don't have to think so much when I want to switch cities [but] the main barrier to getting into a serious relationship is the fact that I know that I'm going to leave in a few months.

The particular circumstances of short-term, precarious employment combined with high mobility needs, clearly, have a significant impact on Alice's life. Ambivalence surfaces as she seems to have simultaneously somewhat normalised consecutive international relocations for work (*I don't have to think so much when I want to switch cities*), while also being critical of having to spend the 'prime time' of her life 'hopping around doing postdocs' (Herschberg et al., 2018). Moreover, contrary to Hill's (2020) studied PhDs, in Alice's case, singlehood does not appear to be self-selected but a consequence of her mobile career situation.

Several of the interviewed women expressed similar feelings of constraint, particularly when discussing the future possibility of becoming mothers. Corresponding to existing literature that highlights motherhood as a specific obstacle to academic international mobility (Leemann, 2010; Uhly et al., 2017), our interviewees deliberated on whether the decision to have children should factor into their career and mobility plans. Many expressed either a lack of desire to become mothers or constraints in choosing that path, primarily due to the demands and uncertain trajectories of academic careers. For example, Evelyn reflects that:

I would like to have children. However, I'm not sure if it is possible to have children with this kind of life. My life needs a very high flexibility. I need to go to the conferences and do research with international collaborators, and this is not possible with a child.

Conversely, for Theresa, choosing not to have children alleviates her of the anxieties of motherhood that result in lifestyle and work constraints, enabling her to pursue career opportunities and travel freely (Kislev, 2024). She perceives settling down – or what Tzanakou and Henderson (2021) term becoming 'stuck' – associated with the responsibilities of raising children, as constraining rather than fulfilling. Therefore, not having a desire for children for Theresa is seen as an advantage and a relief:

I've never felt the pressing need to become a mother. This is a significant advantage for me, as I've seen many peers feel that pull, have children, and consequently find themselves more anchored to a single location.

For Theresa, not having children and not being in a romantic relationship not only provides her with the opportunity to pursue her academic career but also offers other advantages, and a different lifestyle that comes with international mobility. Similarly, other interviewees were also explicit about the benefits of the freedom to pursue mobility. To them, the joys of being internationally mobile are numerous, including the allure of adventure and a fulfilling life (Sautier, 2021). Maria, for example, says:

I like meeting people and trying to understand different cultures. There are so many beautiful places I want to go to [...]. Culture, architecture and arts and everything. So that's something that really makes me want to pursue [international mobility]. Even though I'm going to grow in my career as a researcher, the cultural part is really important for me.

While the women we interviewed value their experiences of travel and especially the freedom to prioritise their work and careers, this freedom is ambivalent. First, it is ambivalent because work and mobility become a restricting and constraining factor for their personal lives, and secondly because international mobility more often than not implies

precarious employment. While international mobility can be a proactive choice to pursue professional growth and exciting life experiences, as it is for Maria, the necessity of international mobility can also arise from a lack of job opportunities in the women's home countries (Cantwell, 2011; Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021). Moreover, the short-term contracts and 'postdoc hopping' across different countries, as in Alice's case, become a constraint to pursuing romantic relationships. As such, while all of our interviewees reflected on the advantages and joys that come with international mobility, most of them also simultaneously conveyed feelings of disillusionment with such a lifestyle. For instance, reflecting on the personal implications of moving across borders, Lauren shares:

Suddenly, I was like, 'wow, what am I, like, the only thing I have left is work. My whole identity.' In academia, we tend to think that our work and our research is our whole identity. The environment also supports that I should be busy with my research all the time. Then all of a sudden, this big personal life factor is gone [the personal relationships she left behind]. And I was like, 'wow, I actually just moved to a different country, to a completely different place where I barely know anyone just for work. What is this? What is my life supposed to be like?'

Lauren's reflections tap into questions of 'expatriate adjustment' (Strauß & Boncori, 2020 p. 1007), showing that such adjustment goes well beyond wellbeing in the new work sphere, but also relates to mobile scholars' personal lives. Without friends and a support network in the context to which Lauren has relocated for her PhD position, 'liquid academia' has the ability to consume her whole identity through the internalisation of hyper-productivity demands leaving her particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Ibid.).

Clearly, for some women, international mobility, travelling, and constantly changing workplaces are more draining and constraining to their personal lives than for others. For example, Evelyn, who has a home in her country of origin (to which she goes as frequently as possible) as well as in the country in which she works, says:

I realise that I am torn and this could not be my future because I do not think that I can handle this for more than five to ten years. And to be honest, at the moment I trust that one day a partner will come into my life and then we will decide if I can switch my job or if we do anything else so that I'm more in one place. I really would like to reduce my mobility because my mobility is very tough. And yes, it is freedom, it is flexibility. However it is also very stressful. And I do not want to do this all of my life. So, at the moment I'm waiting for a partner and then I think I will change my life.

While international mobility and being single are sources of freedom for several of our interviewees, in Evelyn's case, highlighting ambivalent tension, this freedom becomes overwhelming and stressful if she imagines that it may continue for a long period. Consequently, the prospect of entering a relationship and embracing coupledness is seen as a means of alleviating the stress associated with this lifestyle. In Evelyn's narrative, waiting for a potential partner follows a different logic than that discussed by Lahad (2017). Whereas waiting, in Lahad's writing, is a gender-normative temporality ascribed to single women, positioning them as waiting for their lives to truly begin, in Evelyn's narrative, waiting for a potential partner serves as a coping mechanism for the demands of her mobility. In sum, as mobility and high workloads may hinder romantic relationships (Kislev, 2024; Shevtsova, 2023), it is Evelyn's ambivalent attachment to her academic career which simultaneously creates her struggle and hinders (what she sees as) the resolution to it.

#### *Ambivalence of being flexible and overburdened*

The ambivalence that emerged from the women's narratives was not only related to the freedom that being single afforded in terms of mobility, but also in terms of being able to manage heavier workloads.

Most of the women viewed themselves as having a professional advantage in terms of productivity due to not having partners or children (Kislev, 2024). For instance, Sandra compared her research output from the time she was in a relationship to when she is single:

Because I'm single and I don't have other things to do, I work more so I produce more. It doesn't mean that I see a relationship as a blockage to my productivity, you know, but it's a matter of fact of how things happen.

It is well-documented that single workers are generally, but also single academics specifically, at risk of high work-related stress and work-life conflict (Culpepper et al., 2020; Kislev, 2024) – a risk that may be exacerbated by being internationally mobile. In their study of internationally mobile women academics, Strauß and Boncori (2020) find that romantic partners present a key point of enforcing boundaries and a healthier work-life balance, which seems to resonate with what Sandra is saying. While she does not explicitly label relationships being a 'blockage' to productivity as neither a good nor bad thing, to her, it is a fact that she has produced less when she has been in a relationship. Similarly, Evelyn expresses that being single and childfree enables her to participate in exciting academic events abroad, which allows her to strengthen her international networks and present her research widely (Bauder, 2020; Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017). As she puts it:

I can join all conferences and I know other women who are in relationships, or especially if they have children, who are not able to go to three or four conferences a year. And I can do this, and this is totally cool. I can handle my schedule alone. I do not have to discuss if I can teach on Saturdays – because we teach on Saturdays. If I were in a relationship, I could not do that.

Although being single and childfree enables the interviewees to take on additional tasks, which may in turn enrich their CVs, this flexibility often translates into an added burden and an expectation from colleagues that they would also be available for less attractive tasks, such as teaching on Saturdays (Casper et al., 2007; Culpepper et al., 2020). Evelyn later conveys ambivalent feelings regarding the expectations of her flexibility because they carry stigmatised assumptions about singles:

And on the other hand, they use it, that you are a single woman, so that you can work more. You are flexible. Of course, you can do the courses nobody else wants because you are so flexible. And of course, you can join meetings Friday night. So on the one hand, there is a stigma. On the other hand, there's opportunity. Cool. It's crazy.

In Evelyn's words, this ambivalent situation is both 'cool' and 'crazy.' The stigma that Evelyn names concerns the assumption that singles are more available to work as single lives are presumed empty because they are empty of romantic coupledness and caring for children (Lahad, 2017). As we know, this could not be further from the truth (DePaulo, 2023; Kislev, 2019). Even though Evelyn might like to use her weekends for her own needs, she feels pressured to accept extra work (Culpepper et al., 2020), which she articulates with the phrase "Me time" is not a valid reason" for taking time off work. The stigma surrounding single lives could also be associated with ignorance and a lack of recognition that, in fact, as some research also points out (Bhargava & Chilana, 2020; Budgeon, 2016), single people are often more vulnerable and precarious because they are solely responsible for their own health, and economic and social wellbeing. As Theresa expresses:

I was often wondering, is [international mobility] easier for someone who is in a family because they have more support? I have to do everything on my own. I have to take care that I still have a social network around me. Otherwise, I end up being this lonely person.

In summary, in the interviewed women's accounts we see an ambivalent tension between flexibility and experiences of being overburdened. While on the one hand, these women enjoy and appreciate having time to engage in additional tasks and pursue their professional

ambitions, they also resent the stigma that is attached to their status as singles and the lack of recognition of the particular challenges that their singlehood poses (Culpepper et al., 2020) to their mobile lifestyle; namely being the sole responsible for their own welfare in a new context, including the need to establish a social network to avoid becoming lonely or absorbed by work. Thus, we see this ambivalence as situated within the gendered dynamics of academic work culture and international mobility (Murgia & Poggio, 2014; Strauß & Boncori, 2020) alongside singlehood stigma and couple norms (Lahad, 2017; Roseneil et al., 2020) — a point we will discuss further through the lens of ‘cruel optimism’ in the discussion below.

#### *Ambivalence of being ahead and lagging behind*

Ambivalence, following Berlant's writing (2011, 2022), often emerges as a contradictory tension due to the discursive and affective attachments to homogeneous power relations and the simultaneous desire to resist and break through these power structures. In the previous parts of the analysis, we showed how ambivalence emerges at intersections of singlehood and academic international mobility, expressed in feelings of both having freedom and being constrained, flexible and overburdened. Yet, we also see that the ambivalent orientation to singlehood is conditioned by gendered stereotypes about single women and career-making, which these women encounter in their private and work lives. This leaves these women with ambivalent feelings of being well ahead in their lives, in terms of what they want and desire (especially in relation to their careers), and yet with the feeling of simultaneously lagging behind, which is closely connected to how coupledom and parenting are culturally understood as performing ‘proper’ adulthood (Roseneil et al., 2020). Evelyn, for example, discusses how her life may appear adventurous and free from the outside while, in reality, such a lifestyle is not easy to explain to potential partners. For example, Evelyn says:

From the outside, many people think “she has a perfect life - she was in Seattle this year, she was in Santander, she's in [city] in the summer, and she could go skiing in the winter.” So, perfect life, [but] it is very hard to find a partner who can understand this life, who would like to live this life with me.

While many see her mobile lifestyle as ‘perfect,’ Evelyn experiences that it clashes with her wish to find a romantic relationship. Friends in her network have even voiced that they find it understandable that men looking to date may be put off by Evelyn being a ‘career woman’ (Gilchrist, 2022). This label suggests the belief that Evelyn must have little time to dedicate to a potential partner due to her professional success and frequent travels (the stereotype that singles are ‘married to their jobs,’ DePaulo, 2023 p. 397; Kislev, 2024), which reveals the continued existence of traditionalist heteronormative expectations, including how men as the ‘trailing spouses’ of women academics remains a fairly uncommon occurrence (Schaer et al., 2017; Schittenhelm, 2022).

The stigma of singlehood is also evident in the women's narratives about different social interactions. They frequently experience that conversations with friends and family about their single status leave them with feelings of lagging behind, being scorned, or not adhering to social norms (Lahad, 2017). Reminders that single women are living ‘non-conforming’ lives, are selfish, immature, and not ‘living up to their families’ expectations’ (Kislev, 2023, p. 10) may produce guilt and anxiety. Theresa, for example, shares the following comments she received from her family:

I literally got discriminated [against] by my brother, who has a horrible marriage. But he has three kids. This [may seem the] successful way and he looks at people in a way that says, “oh, you know, these women that turn 50 soon and they are single and have no kids. What a poor life. It must be very sad.” And I'm living this life. [...]

And of course, it's also not my choice to be single. I mean, I wish I [would] meet someone that I really like, but it's not that easy, particularly when you are also good with yourself, being alone.

Theresa is a tenured academic, financially independent, and has a home in both her country of origin and the country where she works. She thrives in her solitude, but her life is considered ‘sad’ because she is single and childfree – which she clearly resents. The unfairness of her brother's comment is exacerbated, for Theresa, because it feels hypocritical that his marriage is not well-functioning, and still his situation is culturally valued above hers. Theresa explains that being single is not a choice as she would like to be in a romantic relationship, yet at the same time, she fully enjoys her life on her own (DePaulo, 2023). Thus, Theresa is caught in an ambivalent position where it is difficult to argue convincingly for living a satisfactory and contented single life, while at the same time wanting something else (as well as her family's recognition and support) that she does not have.

In sum, ambivalence is particularly salient in our interviewees' attempts at navigating simultaneous feelings of being happy and well ahead in their lives (due to being independent and successful in jobs they are passionate about, and their exciting travels) and the gendered stigma surrounding single women (Budgeon, 2016; Gilchrist, 2022; Lahad, 2017). These encountered stigmatising narratives that valorise marriage and children above all other aspects of people's lives often instil doubts and insecurities in the interviewed women that they are falling behind, despite feeling content with their lives. A lack of cultural validation of – or the explicit expression of disdain for – their non-normative lifestyles, in other words, clearly affect how the women feel about their lives which may, in turn, lead to experiencing increased pressure to changing them in accordance with social expectations (Roseneil et al., 2020).

#### **Attachment to academic careers and couple norms as ‘cruel optimism’**

In this part, we turn back to the concept of ‘cruel optimism’ which is foundational to Berlant's writing on ambivalence (Berlant, 2011). Here, we refer to cruel optimism as an idealised attachment to objects or longing for experiences that can be unattainable, harmful or counter-productive. As we showed above, single and internationally mobile women academics often experienced ambivalent emotions when it comes to negotiating their status as single and mobile. While being single enables international mobility allowing them to pursue academic opportunities, their investment in their work can lead to a sense of lagging behind in their personal lives because of the stigma attached to singlehood. Simultaneously, societal expectations of women in heterosexual relationships, which emphasise commitment to the partner and family life, clash with their professional aspirations. The discomfort these academics experience stems from the ambivalence created by their desires for a successful academic career and a fulfilling romantic relationship. These attachments draw them in multiple directions at the same time, leaving them feeling stuck and intensifying their sense of being simultaneously free yet constrained, flexible yet overburdened, and ahead yet lagging behind.

We argue that this ambivalence is a form of ‘cruel optimism,’ which encompasses both an attachment to the promises and ideals of fulfilling and meaningful academic work, freedom and flexibility, and is shaped by societal gender and couple norms that value committed (heterosexual) coupledom above all other ways of life. For example, in our analysis such cruel optimism became evident when our interviewed women talked about their academic careers as more than just a profession; they treat it as their passion and a way of life. This academic lifestyle implies that they do not count the hours they work and are always ready to take on extra tasks and obligations because the work is fulfilling. Occasionally, however, they are expected to do so because of prevalent stereotypes of singles' presumed availability and empty lives (Culpepper et al., 2020; Lahad, 2017). Some of our participants suggested that being

single enhances their productivity, which has proven advantageous for their careers. The perspective of academic productivity as a 'way of life' is deeply rooted in how higher education institutions operate within neoliberal markets. Within these contexts, considerations of employability and manageability are closely linked to economic interests (Taylor & Lahad, 2018). Universities and academic professionals often face pressures to align with market-driven priorities as boundaries between professional and personal time become blurred in the pursuit of competitiveness (Valero, Jørgensen, & Brunila, 2019). These conditions can lead to academics 'opting out,' but can also give rise to what Murgia and Poggio (2014) refer to as a 'passion trap' (p. 76), which represents an argument or excuse used by individuals who continue to pursue academic careers despite labour insecurity, long working hours and, as in this study, the necessity to migrate to other countries which may hinder dating and finding romantic relationships. Relatedly, Mannevu (2016) questions whether academics are 'caught in a bad romance,' where cruel optimism takes the shape of an ambivalent affective attachment to academic work as a 'lovable job' despite its many costs. In our study, the 'bad romance' of the interviewees' attachment to academic labour is almost so all-consuming that it risks precluding actual romance – for those who want it.

Similarly, 'cruel optimism' may also be at play in the interviewees' attachment to gendered coupledom norms. Some of the women continue to date despite being confronted with the barriers to dating that academic work and mobility present, which can make them appear unstable, uncertain, and unfit as partners and mothers (Budgeon, 2016; Gilchrist, 2022; Kolehmainen et al., 2023). Such assumptions, held by potential partners, show the gendered expectations involved in heterosexual relationships. Although they wish for romance and coupledom, the interviewees are not prepared to give up their professional lives for it, nor their freedom and flexibility enabled by their singlehood. This brings us back to Berlant's quote (2022), 'we want parts but not wholes and resent the added freight' (p. 36). In other words, our interviewees may be attached to idealised versions of romantic coupledom, but they resent the added freight, namely, the expectation that women in heterosexual relationships should be principally oriented towards the relationship, the partner, and a settled home life (Pepin, Sayer, & Casper, 2018; Umberson, Thomeer, & Lodge, 2015). Therefore, we may again complicate research that insists on essentialising single people's lower wellbeing, as critiqued by DePaulo (2023). Based on this study, it seems more probable that it is not singlehood in and of itself that leads to feelings of discomfort but rather the ambivalence that 'cruel optimism' towards academic careers and couple norms produces. For the interviewees, to fully pursue either academia or coupledom seems to preclude the option of the other, in turn, exacerbating ambivalence and seemingly leaving them unable to resolve their dilemma.

### Embracing ambivalence

In conclusion, we have shown how the interviewees' attachments to expectations of heteronormative coupledom and the productivity and mobility demands of the academic institution lead to ambivalent experiences. Through its simultaneity – of both the joys and difficulties of being single, and both professional passion and the personal costs of academic careers and mobility – ambivalence may imply a state of discomfort. In fact, the entanglements of these benefits and costs place the interviewees in a dilemma which they struggle to resolve. When the freedoms of singlehood enable career success through productivity and mobility, giving up on either becomes difficult, even when productivity and mobility in turn contribute to maintaining them in singlehood with its accompanying stigmatisation, which they resent.

This article contributes to the literature on academic international mobility by shedding light on the hitherto unacknowledged personal costs, in terms of personal relationships, of an underexplored group of mobile scholars, single women. Moreover, we contribute to the literature on singlehood by exploring the unique life circumstances of single,

childfree, internationally mobile women academics. We show how the entanglements of these factors result in experiences in which the positive and negative aspects are enablers of and hindrances to each other in complex ways. We argue that it is our interviewees' ambivalent attachments to couple norms on the one hand, and their careers and the demands of the academic institution on the other, that seemingly leave them unable to resolve the discomfort associated with ambivalence. Embracing Berlant's work enables us to show how ambivalence emerges at the individual, experiential level, whereas cruel optimism situates individual experiences in dominant power regimes, such as gender, heterosexual couple norms, and the academic institution. Taking ambivalence as the starting point of future research will allow for rich analyses of singles' and academics' lives as never simply good or bad, but always both. Thus, the effects of ambivalence will inevitably be felt in contingent and ever-changing ways, and therefore warrant continuous scholarly attention.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Ea Høg Utoft:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mante Vertelyte:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Grace Gao:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest.

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