

Life as a Sport Psych Nomad

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3 Life as a Sport Psych Nomad: Thierry Middleton in conversation with Shameema Yousuf on
4 advocating for change as a sport psychologist

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Life as a Sport Psych Nomad

20 **Life as a Sport Psych Nomad: Thierry Middleton in conversation with Shameema Yousuf**
21 **on advocating for change as a sport psychologist**

22 I (Thierry) first met Shameema (better known as Shams) at the Association for Applied
23 Sport Psychology (AASP) conference in Toronto in 2018. I remember being amazed at the scope
24 of the conference and just trying to remember the different people I met. While I won't claim
25 remember everyone, I do remember meeting Shams. I was immediately interested in her
26 multicultural background and impressed at how she infused who she was into everything she did.

27 Shams is a cis-gender heterosexual woman, who embodies multiple identities personally
28 and professionally. She is southern African, is of Indian ethnicity and Islamic cultural identity¹.
29 She was naturalized a British citizen during colonial rule and lived through the oppressive
30 regime of segregation, which shaped her experience in life. She has lived in five countries across
31 three continents and works with global clients in diverse performance contexts. After a career in
32 the financial industry, Shams retrained as a practitioner sport psychologist registered in the
33 United Kingdom (UK), and mental health therapist focusing on performance and mental health.
34 During her time training to become a sport psychologist she explored other cultural paradigms to
35 better understand how she could best work with different performers. Today, Shams continues to
36 hone her expertise in cultural and critical consciousness studies and is guided by a liberation
37 psychological approach. She aims to support and empower marginalized individuals by helping

¹ Islam is more than a religion. It is a way of life. It is a moral, ethical, and legal guidance for existence in this world and in preparation for a life hereafter. The cultural values of Islam include religious observance based on faithfulness to Allah and the teachings of the prophet Muhammad. They include a strong sense of community in a religious and familial sense. The culture is built on the five pillars: 1. Faith in one God (Allah) and Muhammad as his messenger 2. Salat (prayer) 3. Zakat (charity) 4. Fasting 5. Hajj (pilgrimage).

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38 them to recognize their cultural capital and develop cultural wealth that can support their
39 elevation, while raising their awareness of disempowering structures.

40 When I was asked to interview Shams, I knew we would end up discussing the role of
41 culture in shaping who we are, what we do and how we advocate for socially just practices in
42 sport, exercise and physical activity contexts and professions. And I was not wrong.

43 **From the Financial World into Sport Psychology**

44 Thierry: Hi Shameema, thank you for being willing to chat with me. I know you are a busy
45 person, whether that's working or being out on a tennis court, and so I appreciate you
46 taking the time. I was wondering if we could begin with you describing your journey
47 to becoming a sport psychologist.

48 Shameema: Of course, Thierry. Thank you for the invitation to share some of my story. I went to
49 an undergraduate school in social sciences in the UK and majored in economics and
50 accountancy before completing a master's degree in business finance. I then worked
51 in the financial industry for 16 years before the volatile nature of being in that space
52 began to encroach on my personal life, and so I began to think about what was next.

53 I was an elite international level athlete, and all my life I had been involved in sport
54 and so I began to wonder 'how do I combine my passion for sport with my
55 understanding of being in diverse high-performance environments?' The turning
56 point for me was the 2008 financial crisis. I started to put things into place to make a
57 career shift, although it took another two years before I made the transition into a
58 career in sport psychology. I did my homework on programs in the UK and at that
59 time sport psychology programs in the UK were largely slanted towards sport

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60 science, and by that, I mean biomechanics, nutrition, and physiology. And so, I
61 decided I wanted to go to the United States (US) to train. The programs that did exist
62 in the UK were also very academic and research focused, which didn't suit me. I
63 knew deep down I wanted to learn more about the applied field and do 'hands-on'
64 work that would connect science to practice and still allow me to further my
65 scholarly interests. The program I settled on in the US was an intensive full time 2-
66 year - including summer school – masters in clinical mental health counseling
67 specializing in sport and performance psychology at Boston University (BU).

68 Deciding on a program was step one, but the next step of transitioning to the program
69 at BU took two years. I think this is an important part of my journey that people
70 don't necessarily think about or see when speaking about individuals who migrate to
71 work and/or study. It took me three attempts to get my US visa. The first two
72 occasions getting rejected for a US visa were quite traumatizing, despite regular
73 travels to the US throughout my career and childhood. I felt like I was in a cattle line
74 at the embassy waiting to be interviewed for a visa. When I made it to the front of the
75 visa queue, I was asked three questions and was then denied the visa with no specific
76 reason given, though it wasn't hard to realize that I was being profiled by the
77 questions asked. The visa denials meant I had to go back into the financial industry
78 for another year because I thought I needed to review my plan for how I could move
79 into sport psychology. I decided to give it a third try for a US visa a year later and, on
80 this occasion, it was not a three-minute interview, it was a 20-minute grilling. Since I
81 responded to questions competently with confidence and with consistency, I think
82 they realized I was genuinely interested in going back into education. I think my

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83 sincere interest in the masters at Boston University while being employed when
84 applying for the visa, helped me to get the approval for an F1-status student visa.
85 There is a story behind this too – the fear of being denied based on my previous
86 experiences was so great that I changed visa queue lines! What many people don't
87 recognize is what it took to get there and what international students have to navigate
88 to maintain that status throughout their stay in another country (e.g. not working off
89 campus, only being able to work on campus up to 20 hours, getting approval
90 documents issued and signed at the international students office every time you want
91 to leave the country, making sure you get documentation and approval from the same
92 office for program internships – this list is endless - all while navigating
93 microaggressions of being a foreigner in the host nation). Having international
94 student status or as it is referred to in US, non-resident “alien” status, is a huge
95 stressor that practitioners must appreciate. Mind you, even though a British citizen, I
96 still feel like an alien in the UK at times.

97 Anyway, that was the beginning of my journey to the US as a mature student with
98 the hopes of entering into the field of sport psychology. The program was very
99 applied with clinical and sport placements and internships. I had sport placements, in
100 a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) college sport environment, a
101 school sport program led by one BU's faculty professors and at a United States
102 Tennis Association (USTA) youth tennis and performance center. I also had
103 placements in a community counseling center, a private practice observing clinical
104 assessments, and a year-long internship with a substance addictions residential
105 facility. Coming from the financial industry where I was the only woman on the

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106 trading floor and enculturated into a patriarchal system, I had to really peel back the
107 layers and reflect on who I am before building back up during my training. It was
108 nerve wracking. I was extremely vulnerable. But I soon learned a lot about myself
109 and started to build competence, and I began to gain confidence. In the end, it was a
110 beautiful experience with some of the best people around me to experience it with.
111 Those years in my master's program were some of the most defining years of my
112 career journey - it was a profound time for me.

113 **From Student to Professional Practice in Sport Psychology**

114 Thierry: That's quite the journey, I think it truly shows how connected who we are is to the
115 work we do. Once you were finished your program in the US how did you decide
116 what came next?

117 Shameema: Well, even though I wanted to stay in the US, because I was British and had
118 responsibilities back in the UK, I couldn't stay stateside. My transition back to the
119 UK did not go well. No one really took the time to understand the depth of my
120 training, and let's not overlook the fact that I am from an ethnic minoritized
121 background. I found there was a lot of arrogance in assuming the worth (or lack of
122 worth) of my education and experiences since I hadn't done my training in a British
123 institution and I'll say it again, I'm ethnic. Part of the challenge was that people in
124 the UK didn't recognize the CMPC (CC-AASP at that time) title. I even had
125 someone mention to me that I didn't have 'the gold standard' and I asked 'well what
126 is the gold standard?' No one really had legitimate answers to the question. The
127 British Psychological Society wouldn't recognize my qualifications, so I decided to
128 go straight to the Health and Care Professions Council (the licensing register for

129 health professions in the UK). I didn't know what they would want to see so I just
130 threw everything into my application; all of my records, transcripts, course syllabi,
131 records of my completed internship hours, everything! And that's how I ended up
132 getting registered as an accredited sport psychologist. I was told later that my
133 application clearly highlighted how extensive my training was in comparison to what
134 many receive in the UK.

135 Getting accredited didn't make finding work any easier. I applied about 12 times to a
136 national sport institution for roles at various levels without much success. I was
137 putting my name forward with all the practical experiences I had gained, but they
138 were taking on individuals straight out of university or still in university getting their
139 training. It was apparent they all looked like the homogenous staff bodies - white. I
140 believe I just couldn't crack the system because I didn't fit the mold with my cultural
141 background and my professional identity as an intersectional ethnic woman who
142 hadn't been trained in the UK system. You only have to look at staff teams in sport to
143 see they are largely racially white. In UK sport psychology, I was one of the first
144 ethnic woman and Muslims trying to access the system as a practitioner. And so, I
145 started to build this little practice, through word of mouth, through my networks in
146 sport and through my family networks. I also spent a lot of time picking up the phone
147 and calling different sport organizations. The work I did get was mostly focused on
148 performance and unsurprisingly predominantly with transnationals. I've always seen
149 performance and mental health as being on a continuum, but it was hard to get others
150 to understand this and see a more holistic approach to athlete care. My training was
151 in a program focused on mental health and sport performance. But here in the UK I

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152 kept getting told that mental health was not related to sport psychology, especially
153 when I went forward for wellbeing roles in sport. I think the shift to view
154 performance and mental health as being connected has only really occurred in the
155 last four years despite my advocacy on this more than a decade ago.

156 Thierry: Do you find there are any other differences between your training and the reality
157 you've faced in professional practice in the UK?

158 Shameema: I think the training I got in a school that was committed to cultural studies,
159 contrasted with the lack of cultural training here in the UK was one of the biggest
160 differences for me. But so too are my lived experiences that enable me to develop
161 that critical consciousness more readily. I've come to recognize that some of the
162 challenges and barriers I've faced are really connected to issues grounded in a lack of
163 cultural humility in unwelcoming environments – indeed really grounded in cultural
164 ignorance and systems of power. The limited opportunities I had in sport contexts has
165 made me realize how exclusive 'they', British organizations, really are! It's made me
166 realize how Western-centric a lot of the approaches we're trained in really are. This
167 is what has led to me advocating for us to embed cultural practices and different
168 psychologies into the work we do to really support the athletes and stakeholders we
169 work with. I think that is something that is starting to change. I had a large part to
170 play in changing attitudes of those in UK sport psychology academic settings, and in
171 impacting policy and practice cross Atlantic, even if at times it came at a cost.

172 Thierry: I feel like you've embraced a role in that process as an agent of change.

173 Shameema: Thank you for acknowledging that. I do feel like I've been an agent of change and
174 been instrumental in changing the landscape in the UK field through tireless
175 campaigning, as well as bringing different perspectives to impact change in the US.
176 It's probably no secret that I've used my voice continuously since returning to the
177 UK as a sport psychology professional. I think part of my desire to advocate for
178 change comes from the meshing of my identities. I refer to myself as a "wandering
179 nomad" and I absolutely love and lean into my complex, rich and intertwined identity
180 that it involves. It enables me to see the world through a critically conscious lens. My
181 global meshed identity and my global perspective allows me to immerse myself into
182 different cultures more adaptively, while advocating for change.

183 **Looking Towards a More Socially Just Sport and Exercise Psychology**

184 Thierry: Moving forward, do you think there are key steps which need to be taken for sport
185 and exercise psychology to continue to develop as a discipline and profession?

186 Shameema: I think it's important to see anti-discrimination as a pro-active process. Every time a
187 practice, policy or process is put into place we have to actively consider how
188 intentional we are being in including different voices and whether barriers exist. Self-
189 reflection is a constant aspect of this process and so it becomes a lifestyle choice,
190 rather than something one can engage in only at certain times. I spend a lot of time
191 on reflection and am constantly reviewing my practices and thinking about how my
192 actions were culturally inclusive (or not). Questions that I often ask myself include:
193 Who am I not including in this conversation? Who am I not including in this space?
194 Who needs to be at the table when creating these organizational policies? And I think
195 conversations centered on questions like this need to continue. We've come a long

196 way, but we are still so far behind as a field. I use field in this sense because if we are
197 a profession, we should be more deliberate and intentional in decolonizing training
198 and seeing sport psychology as only cultural sport psychology – it isn't in this sense
199 especially in the UK. We would also be more intentional about creating spaces, jobs
200 and opportunities for minoritized individuals who are skilled but underrepresented in
201 the profession. I am reminded of Bejar and colleagues' presentation at AASP's
202 annual conference (2020) on the status on DEIBJ through an organizational change
203 model, and of how far AASP have come since, with continued efforts required on
204 more global perspectives, and how the UK membership bodies are at the very start of
205 that change process.

206 I think then all of this also feeds into the mental health conversation. Mental health
207 has become a buzzword in sport psychology, but there is little thinking done on
208 mental health from an intersectional lens. For example, there is limited discussion on
209 mental health of sport professionals and racial trauma. We don't often consider
210 mental health from the lens of marginalized individuals' perspectives and how
211 trauma has impacted them financially, physically, emotionally, and mentally. There
212 isn't enough discussion on how cultural practices support their mental health. A lot
213 more needs to be done on trauma informed practice in relation to performance
214 psychology and mental health.

215 I think other changes needed are for other psychologies like liberation psychology
216 and religious psychologies (e.g. Islamic psychology) to be considered and used to
217 inform research and practice. For example, Islamic principles offer a very different
218 starting point from which to begin practice and this is something that I have begun to

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219 educate on. I think we need to begin to be more accepting of people meeting us at
220 different starting points than we may be accustomed to. One point of caution there
221 though is to remember, as with other religions, that there are many different ways of
222 being Muslim. You have to understand the nationally saturated cultural norms of
223 Muslim athletes that you are working with. For instance, different countries have
224 different gender norms, and these present as facilitators or barriers for engagement in
225 sport and exercise. I just think it requires professionals to think about those they are
226 working with and to consider historical socio-political antecedents that shape
227 experiences, while remaining curious to learn from clients. Situating the client as the
228 expert in their experience is important. Professionals need to avoid defaulting to
229 rhetoric of “we need to remain apolitical”, and appreciate complexity without trying
230 to simplify in singular ways with mono-cultural dominant narratives and practices.
231 Also, it requires surrounding ourselves with diverse professionals when one doesn’t
232 have competency in these different psychologies, so that those we serve are not
233 further harmed by unaligned dominant practices.

234 Thierry: I think that’s really insightful for those wishing to infuse more cultural awareness
235 and humility into their practice. I wonder if you have any advice for practitioners
236 wanting to better understand how they meet those they work with at a place that
237 allows them to feel an increased sense of safety?

238 Shameema: I think the first step is recognizing the nature of the environments we work in; sport
239 environments are not always the healthiest for those present in them. While many of
240 us are eager to work in elite sport environments and be able to wear the nice gear, as
241 well as everything else that comes with that, these environments are not always easy

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242 places to work in. Sometimes your values and ethics are not always going to align
243 with the organization you work for. At times you may need to negotiate a bit on your
244 values, but it's also recognizing your ethical responsibilities that help guide your
245 decision making. Sometimes, if there is a mismatch in values and you are operating
246 in a toxic environment, it can impact your own well-being. As I said earlier, anti-
247 discrimination is an active process and a lifestyle choice for me, and non-
248 discrimination is THE LAW, and so I don't negotiate on this. Our ethics guidelines
249 in AASP clearly define the expectations of professionals on social justice and
250 cultural inclusiveness, so I am guided by these ethical commitments. I do everything
251 in my power to impact the environments within which I engage in a positive way, by
252 seeking out those in power whom I can work with to impact change - I work to
253 educate those around me, but I also remain open to learning. If I feel like I've tried
254 everything and the environment is still not healthy or right for me, I am confident
255 enough now to walk away and trust that other doors will open for me elsewhere. I
256 know I'm privileged in that sense and equally, I have worked hard to get to that
257 position, never shying from my strengths of courage and justice. Sometimes (and for
258 some people) we have to understand that it may not be possible to walk away, and so
259 it's about also doing what feels right. Lastly, some of the questions that often guide
260 me are: How do I show up for the people I serve in a way that includes them,
261 supports them and gives them a sense of belonging? What are some of the barriers to
262 belonging in this space? What is important to know about other cultures and what
263 more can I learn? When in another country, what do I know about their history and
264 how that has shaped cultural experiences? How am I showing up and positioning

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265 when in consultation? How do I support others to be their authentic selves and
266 unleash their full potential? What do I need to speak up about and change? What
267 psychologies are most appropriate to support the individual in front of me?

268 Thierry: Thank you for sharing the insightful guidance and questions that I think everyone
269 engaged in research and practice could ask of themselves. To close, I think it's worth
270 just asking what's coming up next for you?

271 Shameema: I'm excited to say that I am busy working on a few publications. One is an
272 ethnographic chapter in a social justice sport psychology book edited by one of the
273 pioneers in cultural sport psychology, Leslee Fisher, who has been a powerful
274 influence and mentor for me. The chapter includes the Islamic call to prayer scribed
275 in Arabic into the chapter, which has never been seen in mainstream sport
276 psychology. The thought of not needing to suppress who I am and being able to share
277 this in sport psychology gives me goosebumps. As an African woman, I'm also super
278 excited about a community book project I am involved with focusing on liberation
279 sport psychology for women of African descent. And of course, I'm continuing on
280 with my practice in the sport and corporate domains and remain engaged with
281 various leadership responsibilities. As for what comes next - the world is my oyster
282 and as a transnational, I always seek new cultural experiences so watch this space!

283 **Notes on Contributors**

284 Thierry R. F. Middleton, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University
285 of Portsmouth in the United Kingdom. As well as serving on the editorial board for CSSEP, he also is also
286 on the editorial board for the International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology and the former
287 Junior Editor-in-Chief of the Journal for Advancing Sport Psychology in Research. Thierry's scholarly work
288 is primarily participatory in nature with the aim of working with, and developing space for, individuals
289 who belong to diverse marginalized groups to bring socially just change to sport, exercise and physical

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290 activity contexts. His work with asylum seekers and refugees (i.e., forced migrants) and immigrant
291 athletes has been the recipient of multiple funding and recognition awards from AASP, the APA, the
292 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada), Sport Canada, the IOC Olympic Research
293 Centre and the University of Portsmouth.

294 Shameema M. Yousuf, MSc, MEd, CMPC, MBACP (she, her, hers), is a UK Health and Care Professions
295 Council (HCPC) Practitioner Sport Psychologist and British Association of Counseling and Psychotherapy
296 (BACP) mental health therapist. She is the current Head of Publications on the Executive Board for the
297 Association for Applied Sport Psychology and holds the association's Certified Mental Performance
298 Consultant® credential. Her scholarly work and practice are at the intersection of performance, mental
299 health, and culture as a transnational in sport, healthcare, and the corporate world, with a global
300 presence in her private practice Empower2Perform for over a decade. Her global activities include guest
301 lecturing at several UK and US universities, applied practice, authorship, and leadership in several
302 domains, while committing to community engagement. Alongside several conference presentations on
303 culture and transnationalism, Shameema has published book chapters in applied sport psychology,
304 refereed journal articles and is involved with a book project on Women of African Descent
305 predominantly in the realm of performance, health, and culture. Educated in Zambia, Zimbabwe, UK,
306 and USA, and given her previous expertise in the global corporate financial industry, she draws on her
307 multiple transnational professional identities and intertwined cultural experiences to support strong
308 processes, effect policy change, and impact belonging in the spaces that she operates. In 2020,
309 Shameema was honored on the Muslim Women in Sport Powerlist.

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