

Existential learning and adolescent identity: Finding meaning through boundary situations



Ministry of
Education
and Culture

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Existential Questions in Adolescence

Questions of meaning, identity, vocation and relationships are particularly salient in adolescence – major identity transformations may occur during these years (Benson et al., 2003; Paloutzian, 1996)

A person with long blonde hair, wearing a dark blue jacket and carrying a bright yellow bag, is walking away from the camera on a paved path in a park. The path is flanked by green grass and trees, and the scene is captured from a low angle, emphasizing the person's journey.

Existential questions in adolescence are mainly questions about the future ('my questions of life *are* questions of the future') (Adamson & Lyxell, 1996; Adamson et al., 2009)

Elite Sport and Meaning

A photograph of a track and field starting line. Several runners' feet and legs are visible on a red track. The runners are wearing various athletic shoes, including black and green sneakers. The track has white lane markings. The background is blurred, showing a crowd of spectators.

“Classic studies of sports work have been exposed as a well-understood but critical modern paradox: young athletes develop within a supposedly meritocratic sporting system in which their dreams are embedded and then made to feel as though their talents are indispensable and goals achievable. Yet their course leads undiscerningly into a monoculture in which, despite strong dedication, perfection is unobtainable and failure inevitable” (Roderick, 2014, p. 143).

Elite Sport and Meaning

A limited control over the future: for example, only 1–10% of youth football players who pursue a professional career eventually sign a professional contract (Blakelock et al., 2016)

Despite the low chances of eventual success, many adolescent athletes are lured into the seductive myths of sporting success, investing little in exploring other dimensions of life, self and future – The discontinuity of the athletic career is a potential personal crisis and source of psychological distress

Learning from Discontinuity?

Existential approaches place specific emphasis on the role of discontinuity in human development and learning (Bollnow, 1966; Jarvis, 2007)

Identity is a *learning process* that involves a relation between cognitive constructions of new meanings and emotional sense-making of new experiences. Boundary situations are crucial because they invoke existential insecurity and the formation of a reflexive consciousness (Geijssel & Meijers, 2005)

Existential learning: when do we learn?

Life-world as 'that reality the wide-awake, normal, mature person finds given straightforwardly in the natural attitude' (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974, p. 21).

When our life-world is in harmony, we feel at home in the world

Space (and body): skillful coping (e.g., Dreyfus, 2014; in sport, Breivik, 2007), being physically at-home

Culture: meanings, symbols, practices that are, to an extent, shared / at least understood

Time: continuity of the past to the present and imagined future

Table 8.1 The continuum of disjuncture

	Type of disjuncture				
	Harmony (no disjuncture)	Slight disjuncture	Disjuncture	Major disjuncture	Strangerhood (total disjuncture)
Level of learning required to re-establish harmony	Non-learning	Minor adjustments (incidental learning)	New learning (some will not respond)	New learning effort/motivation necessary (many might not respond)	Almost impossible to bridge the gap in short time Alienation Anomie

The Study



A case study on existential learning in discontinuity through the story of “Pilvi”, a pre-elite Finnish alpine skier whose career terminated at the age of 18.

Five interviews using a low-structured approach, two before and three after her athletic retirement.

Analytic frames derived from an existential-narrative approach (Richert, 2010) and the concepts of life-world harmony/disjuncture (Jarvis, 2007)

The data is a part of “the Finnish Dual Career Study” (PI – Tatiana Ryba)

Pilvi's storyline

T1 (2015): 'of course, my dream is to ski in the world cup

T3 (2017): Athletic retirement
- Strangerhood?



T5 (2019): Working to restore harmony of the life-world (on-going)

T2 (2016): "Can't get through the track - I cry in almost every practice" - Major disjuncture

T4 (2018): "New Skis" story - Explication of experience; preparation for meaning-making

Disjuncture: The New Skis

“The start of the season was very hard for me, because we had new skis. So I had really hard time to remember how to ski again and with those skis. I felt really frustrated and angry. Like ‘why can’t I do this like I did in half a year ago?’ and I was really mad at myself.

I looked the others and realised like ‘oh now they can ski’ and I said ‘I’m still here’, it sucked being bad.

Mm, I talked about it with my family but of course they didn’t understand because they were just like me like ‘well you were so good like half a year ago so why can’t you be now?’

And when I talked to my skiing friends they were like, ‘oh yea, I know it was hard but you will get there, we did get there’. But I was like ‘yea you did get there, I’m not getting there though, thanks’,

“It was my own decision to quit, but kinda wasn’t and it’s very confusing”
Besides the skis – severe injury, grades dropping (conflict with father), the coach left

Harmonising the life-world: Space

An aerial view of a ski race course. The snow is white, and the course is marked with blue and red flags. Several skiers are visible on the slope, and spectators are standing on the sidelines. A red safety fence runs along the edge of the course. In the background, there are trees and a building with a sign that says "ORF".

I went to ski once last spring, with tourist skis. It is horrible. When you always had competition skis... it just feels bad, feels like shit, that I really suck at it. I have started detesting it, I don't want to do it any more.

I have gained weight and I have been very anxious about it. I had some crazy diets and then got fed up with it, and gained weight again.
I've tried to be active, go running, play badminton, basic stuff... I'm trying to take a positive approach, to only do what I want to do. If I don't feel like weight training, I don't need to do it. I am still learning, that I don't need to do sport if I don't want to. But still I feel guilty if I don't do something every day.

Harmonising the life-world: Culture

'I've tried to downplay my competitiveness, saying to myself that it does not matter if I don't win, it does not mean that I am a less valuable person. But it is still somewhere there in the background... Maybe it also makes me a better student and it can be an advantage that I aim for perfection and want to be the best'.



Now that I'm starting the university, I could start doing a new sport. Athletics, for example. It will be probably depressing and crushing me that I am no longer good or one of the best. But I have an athletic career behind me so I have better pre-requisites for being good than someone who just starts something new. So I assume I would not be one of the weakest. If it was, I would probably feel that this is sh*t and just quit.

Harmonising the life-world: Time



When I was an athlete, those circles were my life. When it all crashed down, I was completely lost. What am I going to do? And I also realised that I didn't have many friends at school. But then I realised that this is just an intermediate phase, I am not staying here. The real life starts somewhere else. And now I'm moving to one of the world's best universities in China. '

It sounds like a cliché, but when one door is closed the another one opens. Yet this advice is useless to a young athlete who had to stop doing her sport. She won't listen. I was that young athlete. You have to learn it yourself.

Reflections

'Pilvi' is privileged to have the cultural resources and educational attainment that can be used to bridge the gap over discontinuity (projecting her success narrative to education and future career) – many youth athletes do not have these resources.

However, another discontinuity lurks around the corner as the achievement-based self is vulnerable to disruption if she is unable to live up to her success narrative.

Restoring embodied at-homeness in the world can be challenging for former elite athletes – yet overlooked in psychological interventions.

Thank you for your attention!

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Project

Learning and Being in Sport: A Phenomenological Investigation (Learn2)

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Goal: The key aim of our research is to theorise learning in sport (episteme) and to understand how student-athletes develop practical wisdom for life through sport (phronesis). This novel framework for learning will form a much-needed theoretical basis for future research and inform

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