Existential learning and adolescent identity: Finding meaning through boundary situations

Noora J. Ronkainen\textsuperscript{1}, Tatiana V. Ryba\textsuperscript{1}, & Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}University of Jyväskylä, Department of Psychology, Jyväskylä, Finland
\textsuperscript{2}University of Lincoln, School of Sport and Exercise Science, Lincoln, UK
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)

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)
“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 indispensible 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
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 (Geijsel & 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

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

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

T3 (2017): Athletic retirement - Strangerhood?


T5 (2019): Working to restore harmony of the life-world (on-going)
“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
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.
'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 that someone who just start 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.
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.

Harmonising the life-world: Time
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!

noora.j.ronkainen@jyu.fi

Follow us for updates:

This project has received funding from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (792172).