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Restoring harmony in the life-world? Identity, learning, and leaving pre-elite sport

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Abstract

Sport provides many youth participants with a central life project, and yet very few eventually fulfil their athletic dreams, which may lead them to disengage from sport entirely. Many studies have explored the processes of athletic retirement, but little is known about how youth athletes actually reconstruct their relationship with sport and embodiment post-retirement. We explored these issues in the story of 'Pilvi', a Finnish alpine skier who disengaged from sport in her late adolescence. Employing an existential-phenomenological approach, we conducted six low-structured interviews with Pilvi, combined with visual methods, and identified key themes relating to the body, space, culture and time. Our findings highlight the difficulty of building a new relationship with sport and the often restrictive cultural horizons of sport and exercise culture that limit the 'possible selves'. We discuss the significant implications for applied practitioners helping youth athletes and effectively supporting them in leaving their sport.

Keywords: existential learning, adolescence, boundary situations, embodiment, athletic career, athletic identity

Restoring harmony in the life-world? Identity, learning, and leaving pre-elite sport

The extensive efforts to investigate and theorise an athletic identity in the past three decades have resulted in strong awareness of the theoretical and applied importance of identity in sport and exercise contexts (for reviews, see Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016). Quantitative research – often using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer, van Raalte & Linder, 1993) – has shown that while high levels of athletic identity can provide individuals with positive benefits of motivation and sport commitment, there are also less positive consequences such as unethical sport conduct, lower career maturity, and career transition difficulties (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Qualitative research has extended the knowledge base by shedding light on the physical-cultural 'building blocks' of athletic and exercise identities (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2007; Carless & Douglas, 2013; McGannon, Pomerleau-Fontaine, & McMahon, 2020). Moreover, the qualitative perspective has provided important insights into the complex negotiations that athletes may undergo in relation to numerous intersecting identities (Blodgett, Ge, Schinke, & McGannon, 2017) and the socio-cultural processes that contribute to identity development (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Several studies from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives have garnered empirical support for Brewer et al's (1993) original contention that athletic identity can function as 'Hercules' muscles or Achilles' heel' (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Franck, Stambulova, & Ivarsson, 2018; Sparkes, 1998).

A strong and exclusive athletic identity has been found to be particularly problematic for the adaptation to athletic retirement. In particular, research demonstrates that those athletes whose careers are terminated involuntarily, who have not anticipated career termination (often by decreasing or balancing their athletic identity), and have not engaged in career planning, can be at elevated risk of psychological distress (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). Qualitative research has shown that it can be extremely challenging for retiring athletes,

whose life has revolved around sport, to craft a new narrative of the self (Sparkes, 1998; Douglas & Carless, 2009). Given the evidence on the relationship between strong and exclusive athletic identity and distress in athletic retirement, it has been recommended that psychological interventions or screening during athletes' careers should be undertaken, potentially to mitigate these risks (Giannone, Haney, Kealy, & Ogrodniczuk, 2017).

Despite the intensive physicality of sporting life projects, Hadiyan and Cosh (2019) recently noted that considerations of the athlete body have been remarkably absent from athletic retirement research. That is, when retirement challenges are addressed, the questions often revolve around (lack of) career planning, educational qualifications and transferable/life skills (Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004; Lavallee, 2005; Park et al., 2013). Often the implicit assumption is that retirement involves moving 'out' from sport, orienting efforts towards other life domains (e.g., education or work), and finding new social networks outside of sport. In contrast, we know relatively little about former athletes' relationship with sport post-retirement and their embodied selves, including how they re-orient themselves 'within' the world of physical culture practices. Although Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) highlighted decades ago that athletic retirement should not be equated with a complete withdrawal from sport, only recently have researchers started to focus more attention on the transition that occurs within the realm of sport, exercise and physical activity. Whereas some scholars have found that former college athletes are no more physically active than non-athlete alumni/alumnae (Reifsteck et al., 2013; Sorenson, Romano, Azen, Schroeder, & Salem, 2015), others have reported that many retired athletes remain actively engaged in different forms of sports and exercise including at competitive levels (Hadiyan & Cosh, 2019; Plateau, Petrie, & Papathomas, 2017; Ronkainen, Watkins, & Ryba, 2016; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017). In one study, participants maintained the same level of athletic identity as pre-retirement, when assessed by AIMS (Hadiyan & Cosh, 2019). Reifsteck, Gill and Labban (2016) found

that athletic identity and exercise identity were both independent predictors of physical activity participation post-retirement, with exercise identity the stronger predictor. Many athletes have a difficult relationship with their post-retirement body, however, and those who sustain athletic identities more frequently experience body dissatisfaction, guilt about weight gain, and disordered eating (for a review, see Buckley, Hall, Lassemillante, Ackerman, & Belski, 2019). Taken together, findings from several studies challenge the assumption that retirement is about leaving sport entirely, and 'retirement' might be more about trying to re-align oneself with the sport or physical-cultural world and searching for new meanings from movement (Hadiyan & Cosh, 2019; Plateau et al., 2017; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017). The psycho-social processes of doing so, however, are still poorly understood. This research gap opens space for qualitative research to shed light on the complex negotiations of daily practices and embodied meanings of movement with which athletes are confronted when they leave behind the highly structured world of high-performance sport.

In the current paper we theorise identity as an existential learning process that is triggered through 'disjunctures' in the life-world (Jarvis, 2007). In our analysis, we focus on the embodied process of restoring harmony of the life-world after athletic retirement, through a case study with 'Pilvi', a Finnish pre-elite athlete whose promising athletic career terminated in late adolescence. Through an existential phenomenological approach, we examine what Pilvi described as "such a horrible time" in her life. We analytically distinguish the bodily, cultural, spatial and temporal disjunctures engendered by athletic retirement and explore how this young woman formed a new relationship with her embodied self and her world. The following research question guided our enquiry: What processes contribute to restoring harmony of the life-world in a disruptive athletic retirement? Based on the findings, we discuss the salient, applied implications of the research and the value of using an existential approach when working with retiring athletes.

Theoretical Framework

Our research draws on an existential-phenomenological perspective that is situated within hermeneutic realism (Yanchar, 2015). From an existential perspective, identity means much more than a social role or a position in discourse, but comprises a more encompassing 'mode of being', shaping what matters to us and what events, actions, experiences and possibilities 'show up' to us and are deemed meaningful. Thus, being an athlete is a particular way of being-in-the-world that is necessarily grounded in the body, temporality, a cultural horizon of meanings, self-awareness and intersubjectivity (Aggerholm, 2014). Young athletes' existence, in particular, is characterised by intense physicality where being-in-the-world is made meaningful through the powerful, youthful and (seemingly) invincible athletic body (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006). Athletes' mode of being is often characterised by projection towards explicit athletic goals (major competitions, seasonal goals, specific times, etc.) that are made possible through years of disciplined practice and that shape their orientation to not only training, but also food intake, rest and other components of daily life.

Existential accounts emphasise that identities are primarily developed through practical action or 'concernful involvement' (Yanchar, 2015) rather than via abstract reflection. They share with narrative theory assumptions about the storied nature of human life, and the cultural embeddedness of identity and meaning-making, while also emphasising embodied and pre-reflective ways of inhabiting lived space (Felder & Robbins, 2011). As Yanchar (2015) noted about the role of narrative in phenomenological thinking:

> Concernful involvement unfolds along the lines of a life narrative and entails concern about the projects of life situated in this temporal context—for example, regret about past actions, optimistic pursuit of goals, plans for the future, and going about present activities made possible by previous involvement. (p. 119)

In our everyday existence, we often take our identities for granted; our bodies, social relations, and projects 'happen' without undue self-reflection and awareness (Allen-Collinson, Crust, & Swann, 2019). Our life-worlds are characterised by harmony, a sense of 'at-homeness' where we feel connected to others and the world around us. As Jarvis (2007) explained, when we are in a harmonious state with our world, we feel related to others, trusting that they perceive the world in the same way as we do. This is made possible by the cultural meaning systems which form the shared backdrop of meaningful interaction and relatedness. In the harmonious state of the life-world, the body tends to remain 'absent', as a corporeal background that rarely shows itself as a thematic object of our experience (Leder, 1990). It is only at times when this harmony is shattered that we become aware of our corporeality and how we are attuned (or not) to the world – and it is then when we learn and develop.

A key tenet of an existential account of human development is that it is not a smooth, straightforward process, but one that happens through 'discontinuities' (Bollnow, 1987) or 'disjunctures' (Jarvis, 2007). The sport psychology literature drawing on existential thought has also used Karl Jasper's (1970) notion of 'boundary situations' (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) and 'critical moments' (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank, & Richardson, 2012) to describe ruptures in the life-world that can push us to change our perspective and find new meaning (although not necessarily for all). What is common to these ideas is the role of subjectivity in what constitutes such discontinuity, in that one event could become a disjuncture for one person but not necessarily for another (depending on how they are attuned to their life-world). Writing about lifelong learning, Jarvis (2007) described 'disjuncture' as "the situation when our biography and the meaning that we give to our experience of a social situation are not in harmony" (p. 3), resulting in a sense of unease and disorientation. Focusing on bodily disjunctures in particular, Leder (1990) wrote about the 'dys-appearing'

body; a body that erupts into our consciousness in moments when it refuses to be a willing 'tool' for our projects. These moments are often associated with bodily discomfort, pain or illness, disrupting the lived harmony of the mind-body-world relation (Allen-Collinson & Owton, 2014; Zeiler, 2010). Disjunctures and their consequences for identity can be analysed for their spatial, bodily, cultural and temporal elements, which are, necessarily, intertwined. While often filled with anxiety, these occasions of disjuncture provide us with possibilities to grasp 'how' we are in the world and push us to change and grow as a person. The analytic points associated with each aspect of disjuncture are outlined in table 1.

[Insert table 1 here]

Methodology

The Case Study

Our study draws on data from the Finnish Longitudinal Dual Career study where 18 pre-elite athletes (age 15-16 at baseline) were interviewed six times over a four-year period (for details, see Ryba et al., 2016). The relevant university ethics committee approved the research prior to participant recruitment, and all athletes provided their written informed consent (for young people over 15 years old, informed consent from parents or guardians is not required in Finland). In phenomenological research, it is common to use low-structured or even an unstructured approach to interviewing (Clarke & Iphofen, 2013; Dale, 1996) to allow participants to share their experiences freely and in their own words. The longitudinal study we draw on was designed from a life-story perspective and involved a low-structured approach, where the specific questions were not decided in advance but derived from the interactions between the participant and the researcher (Ryba et al, 2016); moreover, the sixth interview involved a phenomenological focus on existential learning. The interviews were twice complemented by arts-based methods to gain a deeper understanding of lived

experience and visual meaning that cannot be captured by interviewing alone (Pink, 2011). We describe the details of the methods in table 2. Here, we focus on the story of 'Pilvi', who had been involved in alpine skiing for a decade, but terminated this promising career in late adolescence between the second and the third data collection points of the research. She reported disengaging from the sport primarily due to a severe injury whilst also struggling with performance issues and a conflict with her father, who emphasised the importance of school over sport.

[Insert table 2 here]

Several scholars have recently problematized the various uses of purportedly 'phenomenological' approaches mistakenly subsumed under 'qualitative research' (Allen-Collinson & Evans, 2019; Van Manen, 2017; Zahavi, 2019). Our approach was informed by an existential phenomenological ethos, and constitutes what has been termed an 'empirical phenomenological' study (see Allen-Collinson, 2009; Berry et al. 2010). We thus adopted the phenomenological attitude of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions throughout the research. This included engaging in the *epochē* to make best efforts at bracketing or 'standing back' from our existing pre-suppositions and assumptions (see Allen-Collinson, 2011 for a detailed discussion) regarding young athletes' life-worlds and the challenges confronting them. In relation to the case of Pilvi, our ambition was to develop a theoretical reading of her story to illuminate broader processes of restoring the harmony of the life-world after athletic retirement through an individual case. Following Zahavi and Martiny (2019), our attempt was to produce an informative account of how existential-phenomenological thinking surrounding life-world harmony, temporality and embodiment can help us understand how young athletes' lives can be affected by a disruptive athletic career termination.

At the beginning of the analysis, the first author coded the transcripts and worked with a thematic approach drawing influence from Giorgi's (1997) empirical phenomenological work, and involving the adoption of the phenomenological attitude, including: engagement with the *epochē* (see Allen-Collinson, 2011); initial, impressionistic readings to gain a feel for the overall data-set; in-depth re-reading and data 'immersion', to identify key themes and sub-themes, categorising units of Pilvi's story related to identity development and disjuncture. These initial steps were taken to gain familiarity with the content and to reduce it to more concise thematic units. These initial themes worked as "intermediate reflective tools" (Van Manen, 2017, p. 777) to help recognise prominent elements of Pilvi's story and to reflect on their significance. Careful attention was given to the shifts of content and tone of the pre- and post-retirement interviews, to understand how her mode of being had changed during the disruptive experience. Throughout the data analysis, the second and third author acted as 'critical friends' and we had numerous discussions about how to interpret Pilvi's verbal and visual stories (interpretive validity) as well as the inferences she made from it (theoretical validity) (see Maxwell, 2017). In other words, we aligned our considerations of research quality with the broader realist assertion that some interpretive accounts can be more accurate than others, and sought to address threats to validity by considering how our existing assumptions might be 'wrong' or 'clouding' the phenomena, rather than procedural approaches characterising some positivist and relativist perspectives (Maxwell, 2017).

Results and Discussion

A raft of themes was identified during data analysis, but following arguments that identity and meaning are typically expressed in a form of (life) narrative where 'concernful involvement' is linked to past and future events, hopes and regrets (Yanchar, 2015), we decided to represent our analysis within a temporal sequence tracing Pilvi's disengagement from sport. After careful deliberation, we decided that this would be a more helpful structure

than would a 'classic' thematic ordering, and would resonate strongly with Pilvi's lived experience of living-through her sporting life-journey. Throughout the following sections, our reading of the story focuses on Pilvi's relationship with her body, space and people around her, with temporality considered as the ground that provides her with the possibility of meaningful experience. We use extensive quotes to help engender a feeling of how it is for Pilvi to be living through the disengagement from pre-elite sport.

Approaching disjuncture

In the first interview at the beginning of upper secondary school, Pilvi was transitioning to senior sport and reported that: "of course, my dream is to be skiing in the World cup… with the Beijing Olympics as my main goal." While adolescence is developmentally considered the time for exploring various future scenarios, her elite sport life project appears to provide a clear sense of direction to inform her daily choices and provide a rhythm of life where training twice a day has become the norm. Soon after the first interview, however, her problems began. In the second interview, she admits to struggling: "I am that kind of a person that I stress about everything, and particularly since the school is so demanding… It is mentally quite hard for me." She then explains that she has been 'thrown off' her familiar mode of being at ease with her skis and navigating the track:

> I have developed my technique and I can come down the track a lot faster, but now I am having a new problem of not being able to come through the track anymore… I've had nine slides off the track in a row. I cry in almost every practice because I can't get down the track.

The experience of not feeling at home on the slope and not excelling is very disruptive for Pilvi, as she admits: "I like to win. I like to be better than others. I think that motivates me the most." The cultural narrative resources of elite sport, where winning is lifted as the ultimate

purpose of sporting endeavors (Douglas & Carless, 2006), are no longer providing her with a sense of direction and 'at-homeness' because she cannot align her experience with the story she is aiming to live up to. Her body now refuses to be the willing instrument for her ambition, leading to a profound sense of unease and emotional disruption:

> I felt really frustrated and angry. Like "why can't I do this like I did half a year ago?" and I was really mad at myself. 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?"

Her sporting life project, driven by the desire to be the best, begins to crumble and disintegrate. Tensions with her father "who did not want to pay [for equipment and trips] and never understood or valued sport" are exacerbated when she is no longer successful: "when I had these failures, he was saying 'you should quit'." At this point, Pilvi is a knot of inflamed nerves: frustrated with her failing body, confused, emotionally strained and angry, feeling that no one understands. Pilvi then sustains a knee injury that forces her to take a break from skiing. She is at first hopeful it will get better (perhaps, because she is not ready to let go, she swings and clings to her athlete self). She subsequently returns to competition but realises the knee is not getting better. The coach then 'abandons' her (at least this is what Pilvi *felt* happened). Finally, the doctor's prognosis and advice that she should stop skiing is taken as a refuge; although it does not give Pilvi comfort, she views it as a bargaining device for preserving her athlete identity (which gains meaning through a performance narrative). Her projected future as an Olympic athlete is gone.

"I would [now] like to look more like a person, not like an athlete"

Pilvi speaks openly about her sense of radical disjuncture: "When I was an athlete, those social networks were my life. When it all crashed down, I was completely lost. What am I

going to do?" In addition to losing the shared activities and meanings with her teammates, Pilvi's athletic body, which had been the tacit basis of her performance identity when things were going well, has 'dys-appeared' (Leder, 1990) as a problem-body. "I have gained weight and I have been very anxious about it. I followed some extreme diets and then I got pissed off, and then gained weight again." Once she is no longer an athlete, Pilvi tries to make sense of her body through exercise and femininity-based discourses that focus on body size and shape (see McGannon & Spence, 2010), rather than the capabilities and skills of the body. She has started to think about movement as a means to control her weight, and explains: "Now I can live in a kind of balance where, okay, I went for a run, so I can eat half a pack of candies." When Pilvi is no longer an athlete, her body 'dys-appears' as being the 'wrong shape', something that needs to be changed:

> Alpine skiers usually have very big thigh muscles. Now, I will start running so that my thighs get smaller. As a normal person, I have no need for big muscles in my legs or elsewhere. I would like to look more like a person, not like an athlete, when it makes no difference anymore. So, I planned not to do strength training anymore and do more running and fat burning type of things.

Becoming a "normal" person is not only about how she looks, but what kind of movement activities (and how much) she should do. The future perspective of an elite athlete has provided her with a sense of direction that motivates daily training, whereas as a non-athlete she does not have any particular future to pursue in terms of physical culture practices. She notes that an athlete *must* train every day, whereas a 'normal' person does *not* have to: "I often think when I am training, why am I doing this, when I don't have to." The gym in particular now becomes a space that she does not need to occupy anymore, as building muscle strength is no longer meaningful in her changing horizon of meaning. However, even if she has difficulty in finding purpose in training, the long-standing habits that are almost

automatic in the everyday life-world of an athlete are resistant to change (see Felder & Robbins, 2011). The athlete's mode of being that she associates with the compulsion to train nevertheless remains: "I am still learning that you don't need to be active if you don't want to. [But] I still feel guilty if I don't do something every day."

Although Pilvi attempts to reconstruct herself as "a normal" person, it is difficult for her to live up to that narrative. Some of her previous training practices still feel normal and 'right' to her, even if they don't fit her attempts to reconfigure her identity: "Yesterday, I did plyometrics, which has nothing to do with a normal person's everyday life. It is an alpine skiing thing. But… it is stuck in my brain, it is a normal and a nice thing." Her boyfriend is moreover an active athlete "who is doing sport all the time" which also keeps her life-world – thoughts and practices – tied to the sporting life-world:

> I feel that I need to go training with him and I need to be able to do the same that he can, even if it is not so. This athlete-way of thinking, in a way, never disappears. Especially if our relationship becomes long-term.

"I feel like crying if I go to the slope"

A central aspect of restoring harmony for Pilvi has been avoiding the space that reminds her most of her athletic identity. Two years after disengaging from her sport, she has only been to the slopes twice, using what she terms just "tourist" equipment, and recalls: "it just feels bad, feels like sh*t, that I really suck at it. I have started detesting it. I don't want to do it any more". The second time, she had a foreign friend visiting, and "with her we went skiing, but again it felt like sh*t. But I felt I had to go". She no longer feels at home on the slopes, and two years post-retirement she confesses: "Somehow I still feel that I have open wounds, I am not ready to go back there. I still sometimes feel that I will cry." Emotionally, she is still in the state of disjuncture even if she has been able to start storying her experiences

into a narrative about a new phase of her life. Pilvi expresses eagerness to leave her hometown, which she has always wanted to leave, but especially after athletic retirement, this features as a central part of her narrative. She notes that she "realized that this is some kind of intermediate phase, I am not going to stay here. Real life starts somewhere else". She has been accepted to study at a prestigious foreign university and is waiting to enter this new life-space that has nothing to do with her sport. As she explains: "It sounds like a cliché, but when one door is closed, another one opens." At the same time, she is restoring the harmony of her temporal life-world by storying her life as a series of separate phases with beginnings and ends: "Life has gone on after that, when I realized that there are other possibilities. It is easier to talk about it because it was [just] one part of my life."

"It is so near, but so far at the same time"

Despite the profound sense of rupture in her relationship with sport, there is a crucial strand of continuity that allows Pilvi to project herself toward meaningful future goals and actions. The performance narrative plot centralizing achievement as the prominent life theme (Douglas & Carless, 2006), something which she considers "a family thing" and has given meaning to her pursuit of elite sport, works as an interpretive resource that can also be applied to other life spheres where achievement and winning are important:

> I've tried to downplay my competitiveness, 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.

She notes that she has applied the same mentality in her studies as in sport: "even if I felt like crying – and I did cry sometimes – I just had to push through". In this sense, her mode of being has not changed but the context of its application has, and she has recently "won" in the contest of entry to an elite university.

For Pilvi, shifting her ambitions to education and becoming a successful businessperson has also resolved a lasting disjuncture with her father. “He is the happiest person in the world because I was accepted to a good university. We haven’t talked about the sport [anymore], it is just finished.” The disjuncture in her sporting life project has, therefore, worked to restore harmony between her and her father, whom she deeply admires for his work career. The projected future of a university student also allows her to reconstruct the disjuncture in her sport-life in a positive light:

> I could not have continued in the sport [because of the injury], but if I had, then I might not have graduated with such good grades and been accepted at this university. So, in that sense, I am quite happy after all, that I quit.

In thinking about her life transition to another country to enter university, Pilvi also starts to project herself to a new athletic future. While she is certain that alpine skiing forms part of a closed chapter in her life, she starts to reimagine herself as an athlete, but in a new sporting domain: “Now that I’m starting at university, I could start doing a new sport. Athletics, for example…” When asked whether she could compete again and how she would feel about starting something new when she used to excel in her sport, Pilvi replies:

> Probably, it will be depressing and feel crushing 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 is just starting something new. So I assume I would not be one of the weakest. If I were, I would probably feel that this is sh*t and just quit.

Despite acknowledging that “when everyone has started so young, I cannot think that I can now start a new sport and see you in eight years in the Olympics – it is not realistic”, she still approaches the idea of sport participation with a highly competitive and results-oriented mindset. As such, the performance narrative plot works to provide her with a purpose for re-

engaging with sport, but at the same time it gives her a fragile grounding for meaning that might well be shattered every time she is unable to live up to her expectations.

Summary of main findings

Two years after athletic retirement, Pilvi attests that life has gone on and her storytelling is characterised by a meaningful future perspective focused on education and work, which provides her with a strong sense of student and career identity. At the same time, her relationship with sport, exercise and the body is problematic and she is attempting to find interpretive resources to help her make sense of her embodied experience. The ways in which she has reconfigured her relationship with her body, space, culture and time are summarized in table 3.

[Insert table 3 here]

As our analysis shows, Pilvi has reoriented her temporal perspective, with the past, present and future seemingly forming separate chapters and thus making sense within her emerging life narrative. However, she is far from fully restoring harmony in her life-world of movement, and continues to seek ways to engage in sport and exercise practices and discourses in a meaningful way, to feel at-home in the sporting life-world. She asserts that she now has “a positive perspective” on movement (as opposed to “being compelled” to train as an athlete) and seeks to develop an identity as an active person. At the same time, however, her body ‘shows up’ as a problem to be managed, with exercise as the solution. As she continues to seek alignment with her experiences and the cultural horizons of meaning, there is no closure to her developing story and, as with any young person, multiple ways to reconfigure her identity are open to her. This said, the dominance of the performance narrative plot in her life design, combined with the limited discourses about exercise and the female body on which she is drawing, might narrow the horizon of possibilities for her in the

world of movement. Taken together, they restrict her to narrow techno-scientific ways of relating to the body and sport, while silencing those ways of engagement and experiencing in movement that might emphasize, for example, bodily pleasure, fun, lifelong learning, connectivity and freedom. Although performance narratives provide her with a sense of direction and self-worth, they are highly susceptible to future disjunctures because they always remain subject to her ability to live up to her high ambitions – both in sport and in life more generally.

Concluding Reflections

Our research adds to the emerging body of literature that has focused on understanding retiring athletes' transition 'within' the world of sport and physical culture practices. Through one athlete's story, we have generated analytic insights on the layered processes of restoring harmony in the life-world after disjuncture, and shown how the lived body, space and time are experienced and given meaning through engagement with the cultural narratives that are available to the athlete. Our findings clearly support the contention that having another life plan (e.g., through the pursuit of a dual career) can help athletes in restoring harmony in their life-world, and channel aspirations toward other forms of 'concernful involvement'. Despite this shift in priorities and key concerns, however, the findings also support previous assertions that athletic retirement should not be considered merely as a process of 'leaving' sport (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). Rather, disengagement from the elite pathway can be a challenging process of developing a new relationship with movement culture practices and meanings. Adopting an existential-phenomenological approach has allowed us to identify fundamental structures that shape our experiential realities and may help understand why this process can be so challenging for some athletes. Namely, athletes might struggle with finding a meaningful way of being and becoming in a life-world of movement when their past experiences (of being a competitive athlete) and the culturally available discourses and

429 narratives (e.g., of the female body as a problem) seem to offer only limited inspiration and
430 guidance for the future. The athlete body, once so tacitly meaningful, is now deemed
431 'useless' because it has lost its purpose. To bridge such a fundamental gap, more than coping
432 skills or life skills are needed; there is a need for new meaning.

433 In sport psychology literature, de-training programmes (Fuller, 2014) and interventions to
434 help athletes in transitioning to a physically active lifestyle (Reifsteck & Brooks, 2018) have
435 recently been introduced. They form a much-needed part of career transition support services
436 that have traditionally been somewhat disembodied, and often focused on the transition to a
437 life outside of sport. Many recommendations of these programmes (e.g., educating athletes
438 about physical activity guidelines, nutrition and physiological changes in the body,
439 supporting goal setting, fostering self-determined motivation and exploring the impact of
440 transition to identity) are undoubtedly valuable. As our study highlights, however, in some
441 cases we could be dealing with a much deeper existential issue of 'not being at home' in the
442 sporting/movement life-world because of the disjuncture that has been opened up in athletic
443 retirement. Adopting an existential approach in applied practice can be particularly relevant
444 in this kind of situation because it sensitises the practitioner to the need to pay careful
445 attention to how the retiring athlete is attuned to her/his life-world and finds meaning and
446 purpose in movement (Felder & Robbins, 2011; Nesti, 2004; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2018).
447 Therefore, we argue, there would be real value in including an existential approach to sport
448 psychology training pathways, to help prepare future practitioners in becoming more aware
449 of the depth of issues that may surface when supporting athletes who are leaving their highest
450 level of performance.

451 Educating athletes about the benefits of physical activity for health and preventing
452 unwanted changes in the body is doubtless done with good intentions and can have benefits,
453 but it is worth pausing to consider how inspirational and meaningful these discourses are to

an 18-year old, who is developmentally at the stage of exploring possibilities and 'becoming'. Furthermore, it is important to be aware that some health- and fitness-based discourses, which often inform exercise promotion, are potentially detrimental in directing the retired athlete's horizon of concerns to body weight and shape, which are likely to change following athletic retirement (to what is often culturally scripted as "for the worse"). It is clear that we collectively need to work towards creating and promoting more sustainable narratives of movement culture that can sustain interest and a sense of intrinsic value of movement in young athletes' lives, even if they do not realize their Olympic dreams.

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