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To stay or to leave? Career story models of Finnish sports graduates

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To stay or to leave? Career story models of Finnish sports graduates

Previous research has revealed the challenges of sports graduates. Of particular concern is the question of how sports graduates navigate these difficulties in the job market. This study sought to understand the modern careers of sports graduates by describing different career story models among sports degree graduates. Life story data collection was employed to capture the various influences affecting career paths. The data consisted of 59 career life stories collected from Finnish sports degree graduates who were recruited through an open writing invitation. Data were analysed with the narrative method. Five typical career story models were identified among Finnish sports degree graduates: (1) From struggles to career change; (2) Momentum for a new career; (3) No pain, no gain; (4) Natural path to success; and (5) From aspirations to an uncertain future. Collectively, these story models suggest that graduates seem to balance between their personal enthusiasm for sport and fitness and the realities of working life. Many graduates contemplated leaving the industry, and remaining in the sports industry was defined by how much working life met the expectations shaped by education or personal dreams. These findings indicate that since many sport graduates struggle with the structural challenges of the sports industry, additional support through student counselling and in finding quality entry level jobs might be beneficial in preventing career change and supporting careers in sports. Narrative career counselling is suggested to promote the wellbeing of individuals who struggle in their careers.

Keywords: career story; life story; sports graduate; sports work; narrative research

Introduction

The sports and fitness industry is a growing employer in Western countries (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a; 2020b; Eurostat, 2020). While many individuals seek to obtain a sports degree, challenges regarding the relationship between degree studies and employment have been identified. Hall et al. (2019) found that a degree is not required for coaching positions and that a coaching degree has ‘weak industry credibility’ (p. 10). Turner and Nelson (2009) noted that coaching awards granted by national sports associations were seen as an industry standard, unlike university degrees. As many as 80–90% of graduates have been reported to pursue additional qualifications after graduation (Bernal-García et al., 2018; Sleaf & Reed, 2006). However, graduates themselves have perceived their degree studies as providing deeper understanding than coaching awards (Turner & Nelson, 2009) and that, although insufficient on its own, a degree is nevertheless important for employability (Sleaf & Reed, 2006; Tomlinson, 2008; Turner & Nelson, 2009). Schwab et al. (2015) reported that most sport management alumni did not remain in the industry, citing low salaries and limited employment opportunities as the main reasons for leaving. Similarly, Sleaf and Reed (2006) found that a relatively high percentage, 37%, of graduates of physical education and sport science were not working in education or sport-related occupations.

Research on sports degree graduates has mostly focused on employability, while much less is known about sports graduates’ paths from a broader life story perspective. Some studies can be found in the context of physical education teachers (Iannucci & MacPhail, 2019; O’Sullivan et al., 2009; Thorburn, 2011; 2014). The distinctive feature of physical education teacher education programmes is that they are one of the few non-generalist degree programmes in the field, offering a route towards a specific position in the labour market; however, PE teachers might still face additional challenges compared

to other subject teachers (Gariglio, 2021) Another major research branch involves careers in coaching (e.g. Christensen, 2013; Purdy et al., 2019), and some narrative studies can be found. A narrative-biographical study by Purdy and Potrac (2016) included the career story of one high performance coach, and Holmes et al. (2021) used life stories to study coaches' early life experiences. However, coaching research has insufficiently considered the perspective of degree education. Coaching education research has often focused on coaching courses organized by national governing bodies or federations, as they are seen as the standard route to coaching accreditation (Nash & Sproule, 2009; Piggott, 2012; Turner & Nelson, 2009).

Beyond physical education teachers and coaches, little research has been focused on the variety of other careers within the sports industry. Allin and Humberstone (2006) studied the careers and lives of outdoor educators, but education was not a prerequisite for participation in their study. In conclusion, there is a need for further research on sport graduates and their career experiences.

Theoretical starting point

As permanent and long-term employment have become more atypical in society, the theory of career research has advanced from occupational choice and fixed stages to seeing careers as individual scripts (Savickas et al., 2009; Savickas, 2012). The sports industry is characterized by a high degree of part-time, seasonal, and temporary employment. Due to non-standard employment, many professionals are required to deal with employment insecurity, hold multiple jobs, and perform multiple functions throughout their career (Bernal-García et al., 2018; Campos-Izquierdo et al., 2016; Purdy et al., 2019).

Traditional career theories that focus on rational, individual career decision-making poorly match the lived experience of today's world. Over the past two decades, several attempts have been made to better understand modern careers (Amundson et al., 2014). Pryor's and Bright's (2014; 2003) chaos theory of careers (CTC) acknowledges that a career is not merely the sum of individual career choices, but is also affected by other influences, change, unpredictable events and personal life aspects. According to the CTC, individuals, as the world itself, are complex, open and adaptive systems, and sensitive to change. Consequently, an individual's career is formulated in interaction between one complex dynamical system (the individual) and other complex dynamical systems (e.g. environments and other people). Therefore, careers are not based solely on individual choices and are difficult to predict.

One suggested solution for recognizing the complexity of modern careers is the use of narratives (Amundson et al., 2014; Hartung, 2013; Pryor & Bright, 2008; Savickas, 2012). Pryor and Bright (2003, 13) note that career theories should take into account people's tendency to interpret and understand their experiences by constructing them into meaningful accounts. A life story is a personal narrative in which the lived life is reflected upon and past events and the future are given meaning in relation to each other and the cultural context. While based on biographical facts, it is not an objective description of what has happened, but a selected view of what the individual perceives as meaningful. (McAdams, 2001.) Similarly, the present study understands careers as subjective: while an objective career can be seen as a sequence of jobs, a subjective career is a cohesive whole that includes meaningful experiences that are structured into a meaningful story (Savickas, 2005). A topical life story is a life story that is written from a particular perspective (Plummer, 2001), such as a career (hereafter 'career life story').

Subjective stories provide a context for career occurrences and make it possible to understand individual career experiences related to time and place, offering a window to understanding the ‘why’ behind career decisions (Savickas, 2005). They also allow discussion of other influences and random events in one’s career path (Del Corso & Rehfuß, 2011; Pryor & Bright, 2003). Hence, a holistic career path understanding, beyond rational choices, is enabled, as called for by the CTC.

The Finnish context

Sports degree studies in Finland are offered in three types of educational institutes. The Vocational Qualification in Sports Instruction (degree title *sport assistant*) is an upper secondary level degree offered by vocational institutes, and can be completed either as school-based or apprenticeship training (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018; Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018). Bachelor’s and master’s degrees are offered both by universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS), but they have different profiles. Universities emphasize scientific research and instruction, while UASs adopt a more practical approach. Universities also offer postgraduate studies. (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018.) The university titles are *Bachelor*, *Master* or *Doctor of Sport Sciences*, and the UAS degree titles are *Bachelor* or *Master of Sport Studies*.

In the present study, *sports graduates* refer to graduates from the programmes presented above. A variety of majors are included, such as physical education, social sciences in sport, and exercise physiology. In contrast, following the categorization of Finnish education system, degrees in Health Sciences, such as physiotherapy or gerontology and public health, are not included.

In the Finnish context, it is expedient to conduct sports graduate career path research in a way that includes all degree levels due to the flexible nature of the Finnish education system. For example, a UAS bachelor's degree gives eligibility to pursue a master's degree at university. In addition, although the different educational programmes have different profiles, in practice, the profiles often overlap in the job market (Vuolle, 2013). For example, sport assistants and bachelors of sport studies are both often employed in sport instructing, while the latter can also apply for some of the same specialist positions as university graduates. Sport coaches are trained at all levels.

This study investigates how Finnish sports graduates describe their education and career paths as a part of their life stories. The aim of the analysis was to identify the collective features as well as the variation within the career stories of Finnish sport graduates. The research question is: What are the typical career story models among sport graduates?

Materials and methods

Data collection and participants

The data of this study consisted of 59 career life stories written by Finnish sports graduates between September 2018 and February 2019. Potential participants were reached with an open invitation through alumni lists of educational institutes, worker's unions and social media. Inclusion required the participant to hold a sports degree (vocational, bachelor or master's) completed between 2004 and 2015. The time range was chosen so that the career paths reflect 21st century degree education programmes and to ensure more than 24 months since graduation so that the graduate participants had had time to start settling into working life. A three-year vocational sports assistant programme was introduced in 2001 and by 2004 all graduates had qualified as sport assistants (J. Leivo, personal communication, September 13, 2018).

In the invitation, participants were asked to write their life story from the perspective of their career. Auxiliary questions were included for prompting, but freedom of writing was emphasized. In addition, age, gender, completed degrees, current work status in the sports industry, and permission to archive stories were queried. In total, 68 responses were submitted, 59 of which met the graduation year and story format (plot) criteria. The length of the 59 stories varied between 46 and 1946 words, averaging 512 words. The background information of the participants is presented in Table 1. Some participants held more than one degree or were completing their second degree. In Finland, bachelor-level sport science is typically considered an intermediate stage of master's studies, and not all master's degree holders reported it.

[Insert Table 1 near here]

This study followed the ethical guidelines by Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK). Accordingly, no ethical review statement was needed (TENK 2019). Informed consent of participants was ensured by inviting participants to participate through a web page that contained information about the purpose and methodology of the study, data handling and contact information.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using narrative analysis in which the data were synthesized into a coherent account resulting in emplotted story models (Polkinghorne, 1995). The final story models are of a theoretical nature: While they are based on the data, a single narrative in the data may share features with one or more of the final story models. Similarly, an individual's story does not necessarily include all the characteristics of the equivalent story model.

The story models were based on two explanatory elements: *plot* and *tone*. According to Polkinghorne (1995), the significance of individual events is understood through the plot of the story. As stories are temporal in nature, each story needs a beginning, middle and end. Times or events that change the direction of the story are called *turning points* (Clausen, 1998) and are crucial for reaching the story's outcome (Polkinghorne, 1995). These may be unexpected life events, such as a death in the family, or normative role transitions, such as entering an occupation (Clausen, 1998). In addition to plot, it is important to understand the evaluative element of life stories, which guides the addressee in how the story and its events should be understood (Linde, 1993). Polkinghorne (1995, 17) notes that emotional states in the data provide important information for the researcher. In the present study, this evaluative layer is referred to as the tone of the story.

There is no specific structure to narrative analysis, as different methods have to be developed for different data and aims (Bold, 2012; Riessman, 2008). The following four-stage, data-driven procedure was developed for the purpose of this study:

Stage 1: Familiarizing with data

The stories were read through several times until an overall understanding of the data was reached. A long and short summary of each story were written to help bring forward the plot of the story and manage the data.

Stage 2: Grouping the stories

The summaries were used as a tool to understand the most essential plot and tone of each story. Initial story model groups were formed based on the shorter summaries, and the groups were then revised based on the more extensive summaries. The grouping was based on the two main features, plot and tone. A preliminary name was given to each group based on their most prominent features. At this point, stories that did not clearly

belong into a single group but demonstrated prominent features from two story models, were marked as borderline cases for later consideration.

Stage 3: Analysing individual stories within groups

In the third stage, the analysis was focussed on each full story within the groups. The plot of the story was analysed more closely. First, the beginning, middle, end, and turning points of each story were identified. Turning points were defined based on both plot and narration: moments that impacted the life course significantly or tied other events together, such as not being admitted to a desired study programme or finding one's true aspiration, were considered as turning points. Normative transitions were considered as turning points if there were narrative clues, such as thick description or emotive words involved (Clausen, 1998). The most prominent emotional feature of each story was identified as the tone of the story. Each story was revisited to verify their belonging to a specific group. Borderline cases were investigated individually and as a group in order to verify the justification of the formed groups, and finally placed in the most fitting group.

Stage 4: Compiling story models

A table was formed of each group, listing each story's beginning, middle, end, turning points and tone. Recurring events and tones were identified within groups. Collectively recurring contents were defined as typical features of each story model. Story models were tested by constructing a coherent example story of each story model, using only quotations from the original stories in that group as widely as possible. The example stories were ensured to include all identified typical features and compared to the original stories in each group to validate each story model. The final titles were created to bring forward the distinctive nature of each story model.

Quality evaluation

Narrative research is interpretative action, so the final representation is unavoidably an interpretation made by the researcher (Bold, 2012; Smythe & Murray, 2000). The quality of narrative research should specifically be addressed in terms of trustworthiness, verisimilitude and utility (Loh, 2013). To promote these, Loh (2013) emphasizes the process of member checking. In the present study, member checks were conducted with selected pilot data contributors. The purpose was to check if they recognized a difference between the example stories, to hear to which story model or models they most related to, and their reasoning for that. In addition, peer and audience validation was sought after initial data analysis. The discussions were taken into consideration in the final analysis and conclusion. A research journal was kept throughout the research process to promote reflexivity.

The limitations of the study are related to the data collected. This study examined stories that were produced at a certain time with the understanding of the researchers at the point of analysis. Thus, the circumstances of the sports industry in Finnish society are reflected in the findings, and this should be kept in mind when comparing these findings with studies conducted at other times and in different contexts. The data collection was limited to Finnish-speaking participants who had completed their degree rather recently.

Findings

The career story models of sports graduates

Five different typical story models were formed based on the data: (1) *from struggles to career change*; (2) *momentum for a new career*; (3) *no pain, no gain*; (4) *natural path to success*; and (5) *from aspirations to an uncertain future*. These story models differed from each other in tone and plot. The data were consistent in that all of the stories in the

data could be placed within these models, and each model drew from at least five clear cases. Some of the original stories demonstrated prominent features from two models. In the following, each story model with its typical characteristics and data extracts are presented.

From struggles to career change

In the first story model, the protagonists had given up their career in sport and moved to a different field. The story starts with either a sporty childhood or an early-career sport related job, or with a general aspiration to work in the sports industry. By the middle of the story, employment in the field had been achieved; however, the story ends with employment in another field due to experiences in the job market, which became a turning point leading to the career change. The tone of the story was either displeased if the writers felt resentful, or content if they perceived themselves as a survivor who had succeeded in finding a more suitable career.

The typical turning point in this story model is negative experiences of working life in the sports industry. Some had unfortunate experiences during their employment, such as late or incorrect salary payments or poor appreciation of their competence. One participant described their experience of working at a gym and how it contributed to their career change:

For a year I put up with my professional skills being undervalued and the ethically unacceptable culture of treating clients as idiots. Constant late payment of wages, working for less than someone on a supermarket checkout, and the employer's continuous neglect of their obligations were the last straw.

Most respondents attributed poor working conditions as the reason for leaving the field. Many different aspects were mentioned as down sides of the sports industry, such as lack of jobs, limited opportunities for career advancement, inconvenient

working hours, health requirements, and low salaries. These characteristics were considered when making career decisions. Finding a better job in another field was seen as a solution to these problems.

Regarding personal interest, none of the writers expressed that their original choice of education was necessarily wrong for them; in fact, most expressed a desire to have continued working in the field. The sports industry was seen as interesting, but they had not succeeded in finding a satisfying position in the labour market.

Momentum for a new career

In the second story model, the protagonists had either completely or partly given up their career in sport, but the profession was still an important part of their story. The story typically started with a sporty childhood, advanced to studies and employment in the sports industry, and ended with employment or studies in another field. The initial turning point was similar than in the first story model: the realization that the sports industry is not the right fit for them. However, this story model also included a more positive turning point where the protagonists gained a vision for a more suitable career.

In the story model, sport education was an important component enabling the current, good life, rather than a dead end or a mistaken route requiring a completely new career choice, as in the previous story model. Therefore, the tone of the story was satisfied. For example, one of the writers described how sport education had benefited her in finding her professional path:

In my final year I took advanced studies in applied physical education. That then led me to the idea of doing physiotherapy studies. As soon as I graduated, I managed to get in to study in my hometown to be a physiotherapist. I don't know if it would have been as easy to get in without my background education.

In this story model, the end position was often employment in which the degree certificate or competence gained from the sports degree was usable in another field, such as physiotherapy or education. It was also common among the writers to partly work in sports alongside their main job in another field. Some did so for practical reasons, for example if they considered sports too demanding as a full-time occupation, but for many, other career interests were chosen over working exclusively in sports. Even when the career change was made for practical reasons, working part time in sports was seen as a positive addition to professional life, bringing enjoyment and variety. For some, partial employment in sports was seen as a paid hobby. Some writers stated that sport had always been a temporary solution for them and they had never considered staying in the field for long.

In comparison to the first story model, the typical turning points here were both pushing and pulling: certain experiences of the sports industry pushed them away from sports, while other experiences pulled them towards another field. In this story model, the motivation for career change seemed to come more from the pulling experiences, and the pushing experiences only added to this. For example, typically, the main reason for seeking employment in another field was discovering an interest in that field. In contrast to the first story model, this might be the reason for more the positive tone in these stories. For example, one writer reflected:

Even now I still sometimes think that being PE teacher would have been a great career option for me too, and I can't say which one would have suited me most in the end: doctor or PE teacher. But I've taken the medical route now. The sports route offered me a lot of wonderful experiences and useful lessons and skills considering my own hobbies and for doing sports and exercise with my kids. And it will certainly be of great use in my future medical profession.

As the career shift was initiated by internal motivation, there was no need for bitterness.

No pain, no gain

The title of the third story model refers to stories where inconvenience, discomfort or detours must be taken before achieving a satisfactory position in the sports job market.

The story typically started with a sporty childhood, advanced to studies in sports, and ended with a satisfying job in the field. However, there were hurdles along the way. For different people the complications in the story came at different parts of the journey.

Some struggled in choosing the right education path after school. Many participants experienced disappointment from not being accepted in the study programme of their choice. Some experienced setbacks in working life, such as poor terms of employment.

Such difficulties and occurrences prevented the protagonists from having a smooth success story as a career path. These experiences were, however, not necessarily seen as disappointments, and were often perceived in terms of finding one's own path through trial and error. For example, one participant described her struggles in choosing her preferred area of study, and how her experience of working life contributed to her finding her preferred profession through a process of elimination:

I can still remember the stress and anxiety of having to make such big decisions. I applied to class teacher education and to the School of Economics --. -- I'd also been considering PE teacher education at the University of Jyväskylä, --. In the end, I didn't get in anywhere and I took a year off, during which I worked as a substitute teacher in primary schools and realized I wasn't cut out to be a teacher.

On the other hand, the stories also contained positive experiences as turning points that led the individual towards finding their place in the field of sport. These experiences acted as a counterbalance to negative experiences and reinforced either choosing or staying in the sports industry. For many participants, these positive

experiences contributed to their current career satisfaction. For example, after many struggles in his career path, one participant described a positive turning point as follows:

I felt a great sense of trust when I got to carry out a comprehensive physical activity study for the municipality and determine the remuneration for it myself. While I was working on a plan for a sports and exercise facility, the very same municipality announced an open position as a sports instructor, --. I happened to get it, and that's the road I'm on still.

The end tone of this story model was satisfied, but getting to that point had required perseverance. Therefore, the happy ending was not taken for granted, but personal initiative and survival were highlighted.

Natural path to success

The fourth story model represented a success story. In this story model, the sport education choice had come naturally after a sporty childhood, transition between school and work had been smooth, and the achieved employment in the sports industry met the wishes of the protagonists. The smoothness of the stories did not, however, mean that the protagonists had not faced difficulties. The stories included events that could have been perceived as negative, such as disappointments and injuries. However, when these were mentioned, the story was told through the positive consequences of these events, whereas the events themselves were mentioned only briefly. The tone of the story was satisfied and happy.

There were four typical turning points in this story model. Firstly, many reported an occurrence or moment of realization that led to seeking a specific sport education programme. This could have been a short, simple event, such as learning about the existence of such a programme, or more of a process in which their interest in the

studies was discovered. For some, this related to personal life events, for example when an injury created space for new career steps. Often, coincidences played important role in the process of learning about own interests, as the following participant illustrates:

I was training in a sports centre one day when I met my old PE teacher from high school. I told him what I was doing these days, and I remembered that he had the same educational background. However, he filled me in that he had since gone on to do his master's studies at the University of Jyväskylä and described it as the best choice of his life. This gave me a clear sense that I needed to go and learn more after my university of applied sciences phase.

A second important turning point was being accepted onto a sports education programme of one's choice, typically at university. This seemed to be related to the perceived difficulty of admission into the faculty of sport and health sciences. Many applied more than once, which highlighted the value of being accepted into the programme.

The third typical turning point was a moment, experience, or realization that became a defining feature of one's career. These sometimes appeared to be a random event, such as a conversation, which led to a vision for a chosen profession. More often they were longer processes during employment or studies, for example when work experience revealed the kinds of professional tasks that are interesting and fitting, or experiences during studies leading to discovering an interesting career path. Practicums and theses were often important places for networking and learning about oneself and about professional life and were meaningful in many ways. As one participant reflects: *'That work placement came to determine to a large extent the kind of professional I have become today.'*

The fourth turning point was securing a ‘key job’ that was perceived to have a significant role in the individual’s career development. This may have come due to the individual’s own initiative, or more by chance, but turned out to be especially important for their career. This importance came, for example, from the contents of the work, networking, or growth in professional self-esteem, which were seen as important enablers in relation to their current, rewarding career situation, as one participant explains:

I unknowingly showed my potential to the management, and I was invited to become my boss’s deputy. It was a relatively big post, and it allowed me to get into a position in my career where I can to some extent already choose where I want to work -

From aspirations to an uncertain future

In this story model the end of the story remained open. The sport path had been a natural choice, and the plot ran from a sporty childhood to sports studies and employment in the sports industry. However, the characteristics of the sports industry had created uncertainty about the future, leaving the protagonists unsure whether they should stay in sports or pursue other options. The tone varied between stories more than in the other story models, but the most typical tone was one of being tired – not aggressively disappointed, but not happy either. For example, one participant described her stagnant state by stating: *‘At the moment I feel like my career isn’t and won’t turn out to be anything special or the most enjoyable option out there. But if I look at new options, there’s nothing else that sparks interest either.’* In some stories the overall tone was disillusioned or, in contrast, quite persistent in expressing hopes for a better future.

Two turning points were typical to this story model. The first important turning point was receiving a study place in a sports education programme. Commonly in these stories was that the transition between school and vocational or higher education was not smooth. The protagonists either had difficulties choosing their preferred vocational interest or did not get into their first study choice. After these struggles, getting into a satisfactory programme felt like an important turning point.

The second turning point was the realization of certain unpleasant or unsuitable aspects of the sports profession. These were similar ‘pushing’ experiences to those found in the first two story models. However, in these stories the protagonists had yet to find a new career direction, and only considered leaving the field, as one participant explained: *‘I’ve been doing coaching work for thirteen years, but my motivation is fading year on year. The reason for this is the salary paid in sports. — That’s the main reason for motivation dropping and for thinking about changing fields.’*

As the end of the story remains open, it is clear that the protagonists are facing new career decisions in the future. This was often visible in the final paragraphs of the stories, where the writers typically explained their reflections about the future. For example, one participant, who had taken a career break for family reasons, concluded:

The idea is to also come up with a plan B in case I don't find any meaningful work in the sports and physical activity sector. Although physical exercise and well-being are still really interesting to me and I would like to work in the field, after starting a family and buying a home, regular working hours, regular day work and a regular monthly wage are all the more important as basic requirements.

Discussion

This study identified five typical career story models among Finnish sports degree graduates: (1) *from struggles to career change*, (2) *momentum for new career*, (3) *no*

pain, no gain, (4) natural path to success and (5) from aspirations to an uncertain future. Collectively, the stories show that the graduates seemed to balance between their personal enthusiasm for sport and fitness and the realities of working life. Staying in the sports industry in the long run seemed to be defined by how working life met the expectations shaped by education or personal dreams. To stay or to leave seemed to be a central question in the data.

According to Pryor and Bright (2014), careers are unpredictable in that they contain events that are unplanned and unpredictable, affected by context, and subject to change. In the current study, most of the turning points characterizing different story models were unplanned experiences. All of the turning points were also either controlled by other people (such as admission to a specific educational programme) or in interaction with other systems (such as bad experiences in a work place). While most stories began with a sporty childhood and aimed at career in sport, many different occurrences led to the stories having many different endings. These findings highlight the unpredictable nature of careers. Context, complexity, change and chance were key elements in the descriptions of careers in this study, in line with CTC (Pryor & Bright, 2014) and previous findings (Purdy & Potrac, 2016). However, reality also has a predictable dimension (Pryor & Bright, 2014). Story models can therefore be utilized in career counselling (Pryor & Bright, 2008), since each individual's career path is shaped by different types of events and their personal reactions to those events, as illustrated by the five different story models of the present study.

The findings of this study suggest that many sports graduates in Finland contemplate leaving the field. This is a concerning finding as in addition to implying a high degree of dissatisfaction at the individual level, it is also an undesirable situation from a societal perspective. In the stories, changing career or planning to do so were

often attributed to structural challenges of the sports industry, such as limited career opportunities, poor salaries and the need for degree holders to compete for the same jobs with less-qualified people. The findings are in line with previous studies (Campos-Izquierdo et al., 2016; Gariglio, 2021; Schwab et al., 2015). The disappointment of graduates is understandable, as previous research (Hall et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2008) has reported that even when students recognized that the degree itself did not guarantee employment, they still had expectations that a degree would provide better employability, more senior roles and higher salaries.

However, not all career changes can be attributed to defects of the sports industry. The *momentum for a new career* story model demonstrated the elements that pulled toward another field, in addition to pushing elements. This finding is consistent with Iannucci and MacPhail (2019), who reported that physical education teachers experienced a push from physical education and a pull towards the elective subject. In general, it seems that in order to increase employment satisfaction and reduce career changes, attention should be paid both to improving work conditions in the sports industry and to student counselling in sport education to help graduates prepare for the realities of working life.

It has been previously reported that sports graduates whose career status matched their degree were more likely to be satisfied with their career (Schwab et al., 2015). This is not surprising, and in the present study the tone of the story was satisfied in the two story models that ended with a position in the sports industry. However, the tone was also satisfied in the *momentum for new career* model, and for some individuals even in the *from struggles to career change* model, even though both story models resulted in career change. This was explained by perceived positive consequences, such as finding a better suited profession. One important attribute of satisfaction was a

positive attitude towards part-time employment in sports, which may be explained by the findings of Schwab et al. (2015), who reported passion for job and love of sports as important sources of career satisfaction among sport management professionals.

The varying tones of the *from struggles to career change* story model raise an interesting point. Some of the writers were embittered, others saw themselves as survivors. Similarly, the *no pain, no gain* story model suggested that difficult experiences do not necessarily determine the career path. Previous studies (O'Sullivan, 2006; Thorburn, 2011) have shown that physical education teachers have many coping strategies to overcome the external hurdles in the teaching position. These findings demonstrate how so-called failures in career development can benefit individuals in many ways, as suggested by Pryor and Bright (2012). They are also consistent with the idea that when creating narratives, people tend to tie their experiences into a meaningful whole (Pryor & Bright, 2003; Savickas, 2005).

While it is important to understand why people leave, it is equally important to understand reasons for staying. One of the important turning points in the *no pain, no gain* story model was positive experiences that acted as a counterbalance to negative experiences and reinforced staying in the sports industry. The finding is in agreement with Iannucci and MacPhail (2019), who identified intrinsic reward and extrinsic recognition as critical incidents in career trajectories. The *natural path to success* story model highlights the turning points that were perceived as important in achieving a relatively smooth and successful employment trajectory. One of the turning points was employment in a 'key job', which resembles the description of serendipities and employment by Allin and Humberstone (2006) regarding the final turning points in two outdoor educators' career stories. Another meaningful experience in the present study was the work placement module, supporting previous findings on the importance of

work placements (Fleming et al., 2009; Hall et al., 2019; Sleaf & Reed, 2006). While only limited attempts have been made so far to identify sports graduates' life stories, there are similarities between the present findings and those described in the existing literature on sport students' and graduates' experiences. In this study, sport education was an important stage of the career path in most story models. This finding reflects those by Thorburn (2014), who identified the usefulness of teacher education as one of the main areas that characterized the best times in a veteran physical education teacher's career. In Thorburn's study, another important area was experiences where the teaching subject's relevance and teaching expertise were recognized. This accords with the findings of the present study, as positive, reinforcing experiences were a typical turning point in both story models where the protagonists had chosen to stay in the sports industry. Thorburn (2011) has also reported career deliberations of weighing the pros and cons of the current career, similarly to this study. The *from aspirations to an uncertain future* story model leaves the ending of the story open, reminding us that life stories are ever changing and unfinished. This story model has similarities with the analysis of Purdy and Potrac (2016). They described the professional path of one coach who had previously developed positive future expectations, but then faced disappointments, and, ultimately, was left re-evaluating her possibilities and motivation for pursuing her current career.

Implications and future directions

The present study foregrounds the career struggles of sport graduates, but also shows how people manage these challenges. Attributing meaning to one's degree education even after a career change, and framing oneself as a survivor, can contribute to coherence of the story and thus help individuals to cope with difficult experiences. An implication of this is the possibility that personal well-being could be promoted through

narrative career counselling among sports graduates who encounter difficulties in their careers. To understand the graduate experiences more extensively, further research might investigate sports career stories internationally, as well as the career stories of more senior alumni and of individuals who have chosen to terminate their sports studies. This study also touched on different attitudes towards career struggles, which would be a fruitful area for further work.

Another perspective raised by the present study is the important turning points of those who are thriving in the sport industry. The findings suggest that graduates may benefit if special attention is paid to student counselling regarding practicums and theses, which were identified as important in career development. Another significant turning point was finding a key job, implying that some graduates might require additional early career support in finding a quality entry-level job.

Declaration of interest statement

No conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

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| Gender | Age | Sports degrees | Current field |
|--------------------|----------------------|---|--|
| female 36 (61%) | range 22–51 years | Vocational Qualification in Sports Instruction (sports assistant) 22 | sports industry 35 (59%) |
| male 23 (39%) | average 31 years | Bachelor of Sport Sciences (UAS) 34 | non-sports industry 13 (22%) |
| other 0 (0%) | | Master of Sport Sciences (UAS) 5 +1 unfinished | other (e.g. partly in the sports industry) 11 (19%) |
| | | Master of Sport Sciences 13 + 4 unfinished | |
| | | Bachelor of Sport Sciences 4 | |
| | | Doctor of Sport Sciences 1 | |

Table 1. Background information of the participants