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**From a Junior Coach to the Senior Ranks: Relational
Transition from a Collaborative Autoethnographic
Perspective**

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- 1) Transitioning from junior to senior coaching also means transitioning in a sociocultural environment that highlights the cultural transition.
- 2) Social repositioning, negotiation of cultural practices, and meaning construction facilitate the transition and may assist in maintaining subjective authenticity.
- 3) The transitions of both athletes and coaches could be facilitated by co-constructing the expectations and meanings of their respective careers.

For Peer Review

1 **From a Junior Coach to the Senior Ranks: Relational Transition from a**
2 **Collaborative Autoethnographic Perspective**

3

4 Date of submission: 19/1/2024

For Peer Review

5 **From a Junior Coach to the Senior Ranks: Relational Transition from a**
6 **Collaborative Autoethnographic Perspective**

7 Coaches are key figures that influence athletes' careers and development on and off the
8 field, especially when athletes approach the junior-to-senior transition (Keegan et al., 2014).
9 The transition of a youth coach to the senior ranks alongside their athletes to the senior ranks
10 raises intriguing questions about the relational nature of this process. Personal histories and
11 career development trajectories shape coaching practices (Watts & Cushion, 2017; Ronkainen
12 et al., 2019), which may have a relational influence on athletes' development (Jowett &
13 Shanmugam, 2016). For example, a coach's own athletic career is a key period in which sports-
14 related skills and knowledge of coaching practices are learned (Christensen, 2013; Watts &
15 Cushion, 2017). In the elite sports context, furthermore, developing a coaching career has been
16 described as stairs toward professional or elite-level positions (Erickson et al., 2007; Koh et
17 al., 2011; Schinke et al., 1995).

18 Studying coaches' careers is important for understanding not only their development at
19 the professional level but also the psychosocial processes affecting the meanings they give to
20 their career development (Koh et al., 2011). The literature has progressed from examining
21 normative models and career pathways to focusing on background factors, differences in
22 sociocultural and contextual aspects, and important life events in coaches' careers (Barker-
23 Ruchti et al., 2014; Christensen, 2013; Graham & Blackett, 2022; Purdy & Potrac, 2014).
24 Although this shift has illuminated the multiple meanings and processes influencing coaches'
25 careers, the literature often treats career development as stage-based transitioning from one
26 team to another or from junior to senior teams. Coaches coproduce their athletes' development
27 and careers (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016), so the questions we grapple with in this
28 autoethnographic is how athletes reciprocally produce a relational influence on their coach's
29 career development.

30 The transition from [the](#) junior to senior ranks [represents](#) one of the [more](#) challenging
31 transitions in athletic careers (Stambulova, 2017), [and many athletes struggle to cope](#). A key
32 [to](#) successful transition is finding a balance between resources and barriers, [and](#) one quality
33 factor [in](#) transitions is [athletes'](#) relationship with their coach (Park et al., 2015; Franck &
34 Stambulova, 2018), [as the](#) realization of athletes' potential is influenced by [athletes' and](#)
35 [coaches' skill sets](#) and experiences (Issurin, 2017; Vaeyens et al., 2009). In our sporting
36 experience, we have observed that some athletes in individual sports transition together with
37 the coach from the junior to the senior level following a commitment to a long-term
38 developmental path. Junior-to-senior mobility may also include transitioning into a new
39 psychosocial environments, including changes in cultural narratives and expectations for both
40 athletes and coaches as well as changes in how the dyad construct their relationship to reach
41 performance goals. For example, [research indicates that](#) top-down global elite sports ideals of
42 [single-mindedly pursuing](#) entry into the elite level and [prioritizing](#) sports over other areas of
43 life influence the career [trajectories](#) of both athletes and coaches ([Graham & Blackett, 2022;](#)
44 Ronkainen et al., 2020; Nikander et al., 2022).

45 According to Carless and Douglas (2013), individuals' life stories provide a lens [for](#)
46 [better understanding](#) the cultural context in which they are embedded. For example, the
47 narrative-discursive field of elite sports shapes youth athletes' ability or inability to plan for
48 the future (Cosh et al., 2015; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2018; Ryba et al., 2015; Skubbeltrang et al.,
49 2018). Pless (2014), moreover, [shows](#) that individuals' goals and aims are influenced by
50 narratives of performance, belief systems, values, and practices that are visible in their national
51 contexts (Leccardi, 2014; Pless, 2014). The transition from [positive,](#) holistic youth
52 development to performance-centered elite sports may [engender](#) contradictory expectations,
53 which can cause challenges [in](#) adapting to new [sociocultural](#) environments (Franck &
54 Stambulova, 2020; Ronkainen et al., 2020) or negotiating career trajectories. [Agentic](#)

55 individuals who prioritize personal authenticity may reject dominant narratives and practices
56 and subjectively define their understanding of a successful, fulfilling career (Ryba et al., 2015),
57 but it is crucial to acknowledge the performance narrative's power in the elite sports context
58 (Douglas & Carless, 2015; Graham & Blackett, 2022; McMahon et al., 2019). Indeed,
59 dominant narratives are rarely rejected, especially when superior performance is achieved
60 (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Nikander et al., 2022; Szedlak et al., 2022). Additionally, Downham
61 and Cushion (2022) found that the effect of the dominant narratives framing coaching practices
62 may be hard to recognize in coach education programs, as it requires engagement in critical
63 reflection. Hence, it is relevant to explore how the psychosocial processes associated with
64 transitioning from junior to senior levels influence coaches' career meanings.

65 Previous research on coaches' career transitions has focused mainly on athlete-to-coach
66 transitions. According to Chroni et al. (2020), both internal resources (i.e., concerns,
67 experiences, and self-reflectivity) and external ones (e.g., mentors, coaches, and clubs)
68 facilitate successful coaching transitions. Although former elite-level athlete coaches have
69 demonstrated the mindset and knowledge required to reach the elite level, Chroni et al. (2020)
70 argue that coaches must go through re-identification and personal development phases. During
71 re-identification, former elite athletes must negotiate the meanings of self, sports, familiar
72 coaching, and performance to determine what makes a good coach. The authors also identify a
73 space they term "no longer and not yet" as part of the transition from athlete to coach, described
74 as a feeling of "uncertainty over the transition and some contemplating about what it takes to
75 become a coach and/or a good coach." The counterbalancing factor to this uncertainty is the
76 sense of comfort in staying in familiar territory in sports. Similarly, previous research has found
77 that uncertainty is heightened by knowledge and experience of the demands of being an athlete
78 in general or in a particular sport (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) as well as by the acceptance and
79 support of athletes on a team (Stamp et al., 2023). However, focusing only on the athlete-to-

80 coach transition gives a narrow [view](#) of coach development, as [the field offers](#) many other
81 career trajectories. For example, Christensen (2013) [outlines](#) a typology of coaching careers
82 and [indicates](#) that coaches produce or reproduce ideal types of career trajectories that guide
83 their practices and decisions. In addition to former elite-level athlete coaches, they [describe](#)
84 two other ideal types (the academic coach and the early starter coach). Therefore, it is important
85 to understand how coaches construct their careers in transitioning from the junior to the senior
86 ranks. This paper address a gap in the coaching literature by investigating the relational nature
87 of the transition process.

88 Career construction theory is based on narrative theory (Rudolph, 2019), [which](#)
89 [proposes](#) that individuals construct meaning primarily by drawing on narratives and available
90 stories. Subsequently, the career construction theory related to career development explains
91 “the interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals construct themselves,
92 impose direction on their vocational behavior, and make meaning of their careers” (Savickas,
93 2013, p. 147). Interpersonal processes include relational narratives, [in which](#) coaches’
94 narratives [are formed in terms of](#) meaningful relationships with key persons [in their careers](#)
95 (e.g., athletes and peer coaches). The ability to construct particular kinds of career stories
96 depends on the [available](#) narrative resources (i.e., alternative types of [story](#)) (Ronkainen et al.,
97 2020). [Approaching coaches’ careers and career transitions from a career construction](#)
98 [perspective](#), Ronkainen et al. (2020) found that [coaches cultivated](#) career adaptability [in](#)
99 transitions by focusing on [what they](#) could do to [advance](#) their careers (control), by planning,
100 by preparing to achieve their next goal (concern), and [by demonstrating](#) self-belief
101 (confidence). Interestingly, none of the coaches came up with ideas [for](#) other career paths
102 (curiosity). Ronkainen et al. (2020) suggest that effectively relying on a [single](#) cultural narrative
103 of career success (aiming for success in sports) and [directing their resources of](#) adaptability to
104 obtain [those](#) goals [may leave coaches](#) unprepared for career challenges and transitions,

105 highlighting the need for [diverse](#) career stories. [Previous research highlights the need to](#)
106 diversify narrative resources for career construction (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2015; Carless &
107 Douglas, 2013; [Graham & Blakett, 2022; McMahon et al., 2019](#)), [as providing](#) alternative
108 narratives to the dominant performance narrative [may](#) support long-term development and
109 psychosocial [well-being](#).

110 [The present study contributes](#) new dimensions of knowledge [regarding](#) a coach's career
111 development and transitions by theorizing (a) a relational co-construction of transitions from
112 the junior to the senior level and (b) the mechanisms of this co-construction in a broader social
113 and cultural [context](#). This analysis can enlighten the [cultural prospective](#) narrative resources,
114 attitudes, and behaviors that shape coaches' experiences of relational transition. [Employing](#)
115 collaborative autoethnography ([CAE](#)) [supports](#) understanding [a coach's](#) unique personal
116 experiences and the [sociocultural](#) influences in the process of career construction and relational
117 transition from the junior to senior level.

118 **Theoretical Framework**

119 [This paper employs](#) the cultural transition model (CTM) as a conceptual framework
120 (Ryba et al., 2016) to explore the temporality of the first author's (Jakob, a pseudonym)
121 relational transition through the phases of a cultural transition: pre-transition, acute cultural
122 adaptation, and sociocultural adaptation. This model [was](#) developed [on the basis of](#) life-story
123 interviews with athletes, [but](#) it can also be applied to analyze coaches' transitions [in adapting](#)
124 to a new [sociocultural](#) position. According to the CTM, three underlying psychological
125 mechanisms—social repositioning, negotiation of cultural practices, and meaning
126 reconstruction—[facilitate](#) the transition. The pre-transition phase [involves](#) preparing for future
127 repositioning and [possibly gathering](#) information [on](#) the overall sociocultural environment,
128 [enabling](#) mental preparation for future career adaptations. Acute cultural adaptation refers to
129 the experiences that athletes confront immediately after transition. In this phase, individuals

130 [must](#) learn, understand, and fit in with a new culture and social context [and](#) [must negotiate](#)
131 possible mismatches [with](#) their established routines and practices. The sociocultural adaptation
132 phase [involves](#) the psychological adjustment to a longer-term transfer and settlement in the
133 community, ideally [establishing](#) equilibrium between the self and society. Ryba et al. (2016,
134 2020) [stress](#) that a cultural transition is constructed through relationships. Relational processes
135 are never linear; therefore, the three phases of the transition may not progress linearly to
136 sociocultural adaptation (see “AASP-IRC Newsletter,” November 10, 2021).

137 [This paper focuses](#) on the negotiation of subject positions in the transition process. We
138 understand subject positions as how people make sense of who they are by locating themselves
139 within culturally circulating narratives. When coaches adopt a subject position, they take on
140 certain conscious and subconscious ways of thinking and feeling (Davies & Harre, 1990;
141 Kavoura, 2018). For example, those who position themselves as elite coaches are likely to align
142 with the performance narrative and strive to [ascend](#) the elite sport hierarchy to feel successful.
143 [Focusing on the subject positions and associated meanings available to junior coaches during](#)
144 [the junior-to-senior transition may enrich our understanding of how coaches relationally](#)
145 [construct this transition in the context of career development.](#)

146 **Methodology**

147 [This study adopted](#) a collaborative autoethnographic approach to [coproduce](#) Jakob’s
148 story of his relational transitions as a coach from junior to senior sports. We drew on
149 epistemological constructivism to understand Jakob’s subjective experiences and development.
150 According to constructivism, subjective experiences are ongoing and [integrated within the](#)
151 [sociocultural context. This research positions](#) Jakob’s narratives [to illuminate](#) how he
152 constructed his coaching career and clarified his personal meanings in the narrative context of
153 elite sports culture. The autoethnographic approach enabled us to analyze [his](#) life story, which

154 is constituted in multiple sociocultural sporting contexts, to gain an understanding of the
155 phenomena of relational transition through the unique lens of self (Chang, 2012).

156 To produce the autoethnography, we combined interpretation of Jakob's life story with
157 the CTM theory and the phases of cultural transition. According to Sparkes (2020),
158 *autoethnography* includes three components: *auto-*, *ethno*, and *-graphy*. Jakob's personal
159 experience (*auto*) was used to interpret (*graphy*) beliefs and meanings related to the relational
160 transition in the elite sports environment (*ethno*). This approach is especially compatible with
161 the investigation of relational transition, as it offers analytical insights into cultural
162 interpretations of the connectivity between self and others (Anderson, 2006; Lee et al., 2020),
163 that is, how Jakob responded to changing social relations in the transition processes and how
164 his sociocultural contexts shaped his perspectives, behaviors, and decisions.

165 While autoethnography provides a tool for constructing narrative interpretation, CAE
166 adds rigor to autobiographical interrogation through its multi-voiced contribution (Chang,
167 2012). CAE is often conducted by a team of researchers who share autobiographical material
168 to collectively explore and interpret their stories. In our study, the second author offered an
169 alternative lens to examine the first author's subjectivity, which greatly enriched Jakob's
170 understanding of the relational constitution of transitions in his autobiographical data. For
171 example, she played devil's advocate, prompting Jakob to critically reflect on the strength of
172 his values by posing challenges such as, "Imagine a situation where your athlete starts feeling
173 that you're not providing enough and desires a more performance-oriented approach."
174 Additionally, the second author's experience of multiple cultural transitions and elite sport
175 narratives brought significant value to the research, enhancing the conceptualization and
176 interpretation of the data (Chang, 2012).

177 **Procedures**

178 Over a period of six months, Jakob reflected, shared, and discussed [pieces](#) of his career
179 story with the second author [and](#) members of their research group. First, we used a photo-
180 elicitation method to generate data [on](#) Jakob's experiences of coaching development, career
181 development, and culture in different sports. Based on these accounts, the second author
182 engaged him further in cyclical interviewing [that](#) explored how the relationship [developed](#)
183 between Jakob and his athlete "Lena" (a pseudonym) [and examined the](#) resources [he](#) drew on
184 during his transition from coaching at the junior level to coaching at the senior level, his career
185 construction as a coach, and the dominant cultural narratives. [As a member \(i.e., coach,](#)
186 [educator\) of the cross-country skiing community whose position was shifting from junior to](#)
187 [senior coach, Jakob was able to reflect on his career in the context of elite sports and to](#)
188 [problematize the dominant narratives and some of his beliefs \(Nikander et al., 2022\). His](#)
189 [academic career and research work on sports culture as well on athletes' career development](#)
190 [helped him become aware of these basic assumptions and engage in critical reflexive practices](#)
191 [\(Downham & Cushion, 2022\). By bringing CTM into the analytical process, we sought to](#)
192 [conceptualize the relational co-construction of the transition as well as the sociocultural](#)
193 [mechanism underpinning Jacob's experiences.](#)

194 [Our study fully aligned with the research guidelines of the Finnish National Board on](#)
195 [Research Integrity \(2023\), which did not require ethical pre-approval of the research from the](#)
196 [university's ethical committee. However,](#) we followed the American Psychological
197 Association's (2017) Code of Conduct [and](#) situated the study within the current [national and](#)
198 [European Union](#) guidelines [for](#) the ethical conduct of research, [particularly in relation to the](#)
199 [voluntary nature](#) of self-disclosed information and the protection of [individuals'](#) personal data
200 in the first author's narrative. The latter was achieved through the process of pseudonymization
201 (i.e., the deidentification of unique personal identifiers) on interview transcripts, notes, process

202 codes, and analysis outcomes, including the current manuscript. Moreover, we have been
203 cognizant of representing [diverse](#) social actors with dignity in the oral and written accounts.

204 We also critically reflected on who would benefit from our study and on how to frame
205 our research questions to advance the current literature in sports psychology and coaching
206 practice instead of supporting the current status quo. The key principle for ethical action in this
207 research stems from the relational ethics concept, [which](#) foregrounds mutual respect,
208 engagement, embodied knowledge, environment, and uncertainty (Pollard, 2015). As
209 illuminated by Chroni et al. (2021), “Relational ethics is situated in the interpersonal
210 relationship to highlight connectedness between researcher and researched as well as between
211 researchers and the communities in which they live and work” (p. 6). Consequently, the
212 relationship that we constructed as coauthors provided the moral space for our interdependent
213 decisions. It also gave us shared responsibility over the process and product of this study.

214 Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) assert that ethical objectivity is akin to scientific
215 objectivity, which, in essence, is about “letting the objects object” to what researchers “do to
216 them and say about them” (p. 161). This assertion resonates strongly with the relational ethics
217 framework and directed our thinking toward humility in our decision-making concerning the
218 interpretations and representations of Jakob’s athlete in his story of the relational transitions
219 with [the athlete](#). First, we decided to be explicit from the beginning that the study is about *his*
220 perceptions and experiences of making sense of the junior-to-senior transition in the relational
221 space with his transitioning athlete. He [had](#) the power to object to the interviewer and co-
222 researcher in writing about his athlete’s actions, values, hopes, and vulnerabilities [within](#) the
223 fabric of his life story. Honoring uncertainty as a truth [in which](#) “practical wisdom—the skill
224 of clear perception and judgement—becomes more important than theoretical understanding
225 and the ability to use abstract procedures,” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p. 175) we asked for

226 understanding rooted in his relational space with athletes and [sought](#) a thick description of the
227 relational transition.

228 Second, we presented [Jakob's](#) relational stories to the involved athlete and asked for
229 corrections, alternative interpretations, and [an](#) overall validation of our representation. [We also](#)
230 [explained to the athlete, Lena, the difference between the process of pseudonymization and the](#)
231 [anonymization of her identity and experience. Although she](#) did not suggest any corrections or
232 alternative interpretations, [Lena](#) was surprised [by](#) Jakob's feelings and experiences of
233 [insecurity and pressure to move up](#) the ranks. Subsequently, Jakob's story facilitated her
234 reflection and provided [the dyad a space](#) for [collaborative](#) sharing that deepened their
235 relationship.

236 **Participants**

237 _____ Jakob (33 years old) is a male coach with experience as a national-level skier (coaching
238 himself after [his](#) junior years), having [won](#) medals in national championship relays, collected
239 several top-[eight](#) finishes in individual races at national championships, participated in the
240 University Games (ranking as high as [fourth](#)), and started in three World Cups. He has over 15
241 years' experience as a coach, starting [with](#) the local track and field club in his junior years,
242 [when he was](#) responsible for the youth group of track and field athletes. After [beginning](#) his
243 studies in [a](#) Faculty of Sport Sciences, he coached 12-[to](#) 14-year-old track and field athletes at
244 a local club. During his studies, he acquired a coaching position in the [Finnish Ski Association](#)
245 and became responsible for three groups (national training camps for 15-[to](#) 16-year-olds; the
246 U18 national team; regional training camps in which he served as head coach).

247 _____ Jakob holds a master's degree in [sports](#) sciences (physiology) and a PhD in philosophy
248 (psychology). He studied [sports](#) psychology in Norway and was on an athletic scholarship in
249 the United States. In addition to his coaching position, he has worked as an expert in
250 physiology/coaching in the Finnish Institute of High Performance Sports and as a coach

251 educator for the Finnish Ski Association (in levels I–III). Currently, he coaches three athletes
252 (two skiers and one orienteer, a former skier), with whom he has coaching relationships ranging
253 from three to five years. He has achieved success as a coach at the junior level, as his athletes
254 have won fourth place at the Junior World Championship in Skiing and second place at the
255 European Olympic Youth Festival and the Junior World Championship in Orienteering. At the
256 senior level, his athletes have participated in world championships and European
257 championships in orienteering and participated in the World Cup in skiing. Lena, a 22-year-
258 old female, is one of his athletes. She is a junior world and European champion in orienteering,
259 a top-10 skier in the Junior World Championships, and a participant in senior European
260 championships and world championships immediately following her junior years.

261 **Data Analysis**

262 The photo-elicitation data and cyclical interview transcripts were analyzed following a
263 thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). The analysis focused on the communicated
264 content—that is, what Jakob expressed and said—and represented the autobiographical
265 account of the self. In thematic narrative analysis, the researcher investigates, explains, and
266 processes story lines as well as identifying connections to theory (Riessman, 2008). This study
267 followed an analytical process based on Riessman’s (2008) recommendations and the processes
268 used in sports psychology studies (Smith, 2016): (a) the conversations encompassing
269 discussions of the photos’ story lines, followed by cyclical interviewing, were recorded and
270 transcribed, and the second author took reflexive notes on each story, noting major life events,
271 the meanings attached to them, and the temporality of these experiences; she also mapped
272 narrative tensions or contradictions/inconsistencies in Jakob’s accounts, which were probed
273 further as an invitation to discuss Jakob’s shifting subject positions (e.g., “As a coach, you may
274 not have personally aspired to reach the senior level, but you were actively working toward it
275 with Lena”); (b) after the data collection was completed, both Jakob and the second author

276 reviewed transcripts and used inductive analysis [to](#) identify narrative phrases and actions that
277 described the major events of the relational transition (e.g., “She [Lena] was the one pushing
278 you to embody the new role and explore what it ‘truly’ means to be a senior coach”) while
279 being conscious that the story and the analysis [were](#) sensitive to the background knowledge [in](#)
280 the literature; (c) Jakob constructed a temporal representation of the stories based on the
281 [identified](#) themes and representative quotes; (d) the stories and themes were interpreted based
282 on the [coaching](#) career development literature and [broader](#) sporting narratives (e.g.,
283 performance orientation in junior sports) in Finland, creating complete reconstructed
284 narratives. We then explored [which](#) actions were enabled or [hampered](#) by the subject positions
285 [available to](#) Jakob.

286 [The](#) following sections present [Jakob’s](#) subject positions during the CTM phases that
287 we identified. [Subsequently](#), we discuss the relational transition from the junior to the senior
288 level, drawing on the CTM. We conclude by offering suggestions for future research and
289 practice.

290 Findings and Discussion

291 [Based](#) on narrative thematic analysis of the collaborative auto-ethnobiographic
292 accounts (i.e., the collected data), Jakob’s narratives are presented by highlighting the subject
293 positions related to his relational transition from coaching juniors to coaching in the senior
294 ranks. We recognize three subject positions: (a) junior coach, (b) senior coach, and (c) mentor.

295 **Junior Coach—[Pre-transition](#): Emphasizing Holistic Development and Well-being**

296 [According to the CTM \(Ryba et al., 2016\), it is crucial in the pre-transition phase to](#)
297 [prepare for social repositioning by gathering information and mental preparation](#). Jakob’s story
298 about the pre-transition phase [stressed that](#) he emphasized long-term [athletic](#) development and
299 prepared Lena for her senior athlete career by coproducing the idea of a good athlete:

300 The important factor in our relationships was finding a balance between school and
301 training. She wanted to do things perfectly. She was a bit insecure, and she has struggled
302 with energy availability. We have gone through these kinds of hardships/issues. She
303 gets stressed about missing practice or not training enough. She had a hard time getting
304 enough recovery and balanced training. So, we have been focusing on what is required
305 to be a successful athlete: maintaining well-being and taking a long-term perspective.
306 (Jakob)

307 Jakob's approach to [the ideal of](#) being a good athlete [aligns](#) with the literature, focusing
308 on [realizing](#) athletes' potential, which [is](#) influenced by motivation, well-being, and life balance
309 (Issurin, 2017; Vaeyens et al., 2009). Lena had high expectations to succeed in multiple areas
310 of life, as she was pursuing [a](#) highly demanding higher education program. Jakob felt
311 responsible for [her](#) development, [recognizing the increasing](#) pressure from her sporting
312 environments [as](#) previously [described](#) by Nikander et al. (2022). [In addition, Lena was](#)
313 [influenced by the](#) cultural expectations [sometimes experienced by](#) adolescent female athletes,
314 [who are expected](#) to live up to the "superwoman" ideal as observed by Kavoura and Ryba
315 (2020). Although Lena was on a dual career path, Jakob recognized the influence [on her](#) of the
316 modern logic of competitive sport (Ronkainen et al., 2022; Douglas, 2015) and performance
317 orientation (i.e., results are important) [as she](#) aimed to live the [role](#) of elite athlete (Carless &
318 Douglas, 2013). Although it has been shown that coaches may adopt rhetoric support on
319 holistic development (Ronkainen et al., 2017), as well as well-being, Jakob's education and
320 experience assisted him in guiding Lena and providing her with resources for her development
321 through her junior years. This was supported by Lena's [achieving](#) success in her junior years
322 and [being](#) accepted into [her target](#) higher education program.

323 [During](#) his junior coaching years, Jakob [adopted](#) a holistic development [paradigm](#).
324 [Despite a performance](#) orientation [in](#) youth sports environments and among peer coaches as

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1.

325 highlighted by Nikander et al. (2022), [he](#) resisted the behavior and attitudes of performance
326 orientation in junior sports. He had had multiple conversations with peer coaches about youth
327 athlete development and felt he was an outsider in the coaching community. [This may have](#)
328 [hindered his preparation for the transition, as he was neither curious about building a career in](#)
329 [the higher ranks \(Ronkainen et al., 2020; Savickas, 2013\) nor exploring and mentally preparing](#)
330 [for the challenges of a high-performance environment \(Ryba et al., 2016\).](#) In line with Carless
331 and Douglas (2013), who argue that resisting a culturally dominant narrative is never easy and
332 rarely without cost, Jakob stated:

333 As a junior coach, I could go against the stream in the local environments and be
334 confident in having different ideas compared to other coaches or to dominant narratives
335 of youth development in Finland. This has also required many resources from me, as it
336 created resistance from coaching colleagues. However, as a junior coach, I have been
337 mostly confident of my direction and methods, as both feedback from the athletes and
338 the results have been positive. Of course, it has also isolated me from the coaching
339 community.

340 Jakob constructed his coaching career as a junior coach, [which provided the context for](#)
341 [the meanings of control, confidence, and concern in his coaching career.](#) This was strengthened
342 by [his](#) achieving good [results](#) and [by](#) his athletes' [developing](#) athletically. Embodying the junior
343 coach subject position, Jakob constructed his present and future self as being responsible for
344 Lena's athletic career and supporting her well-being. During the pre-transition phase, [he](#) guided
345 Lena to transition from one world (junior-level sports) to another (senior-level sports).

346 **Senior Coach—Acute Cultural Transition: The Tension of the Performance Narrative**
347 **in Elite Sports**

348 During his junior coaching years, Jakob adopted a voluntarism approach to sport and
349 perceived coaching as a calling that was worthwhile due to love of sports and the desire to pass
350 on knowledge as described in Ronkainen et al. (2020). He stated:

351 My main motivation to coach has been being able [to help] young athletes in their
352 development and creating a space that is safe in which they can enjoy the sport, play
353 and feel competent, pursue their goals, and create meaningful relationships. Youth sport
354 is expensive as well; parents use so much money on it nowadays, so I think that money
355 should be used for supporting athletes. I have been talking with athletes about this: if I
356 would take payment, would it change the approach I have, which relies on voluntarism?
357 Would it shut down the spark on the field, where I feel competent and enjoy being a
358 coach?

359 As Lena transitioned from the junior to the senior ranks, Jakob experienced an acute
360 cultural transition (i.e., one in which everything is different for the one who transitions) as
361 described by Ryba et al. (2016). In this acute cultural phase, Jakob was socially repositioned
362 from a voluntarism narrative to an elite sports performance narrative. According to the CTM
363 (Ryba et al., 2016), social repositioning and negotiating the meanings associated with the new
364 positioning play crucial roles in facilitating adaptation in the cultural transition process. Lena
365 had already attended senior competitions in her junior years and had experienced the demands
366 of elite sports, underpinned by the performance narrative, thus making the transition relatively
367 fluid for her. For example, she had a clear vision of elite athletes' way of living, training, and
368 emphasizing results, which guided her behavior. Furthermore, she had clear career goals and
369 aimed to reach an elite level.

FROM A JUNIOR COACH TO THE SENIOR RANKS

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370 Jakob had no previous experience of working in the elite sports environment at the
371 senior level, and he had no personal coaching role models, as he had served as his own coach
372 during his personal transition, which is a resource in the transition process (Chroni et al., 2020).
373 Neither was Jakob familiar with case stories of coaches transitioning from junior to senior,
374 which could have facilitated the evolution of his beliefs as suggested by Downham and Cushion
375 (2022). This created an unknown space for Jakob's transition. He was obligated to socially
376 reposition himself as a senior coach, which pushed him to be more clear sighted and further
377 explore what it meant to be a senior coach. To fit into the new culture and normative ways of
378 being a senior coach, he had to come to terms with his new subject position. As Kavoura (2018)
379 shows, certain ways of thinking and behaving were available to Jakob through the performance
380 narrative of elite sport as he assumed a senior coach subject position. He claimed:

381 I had a clear vision and experience working as a junior coach, but during the transition,
382 I started to think that results are the measure of being a successful coach and from where
383 I get a sense of competence. In addition, Lena's perception of how she should train
384 changed. She had been reflecting on how the elite and most successful athletes train
385 and the kind of training volume they do. I still relied strongly on the youth development
386 attitudes of having fun, enjoyment, motivation, supporting confidence, and finding
387 positive outcomes even when things do not go as planned. I tried to be flexible and
388 share responsibility with Lena, even to the extent that Lena once said that I should be
389 stricter and not always ask for her opinion. This also fostered more insecurity in my
390 own practices.

391 In moving from the junior to the senior level, Jakob found himself transitioning from
392 one subject position to another, specifically from a holistic youth development narrative and
393 voluntary coach ideology to an elite sport performance narrative. He began comparing himself
394 to other senior coaches and their practices and to negotiate his career trajectory as a coach. He

395 struggled with expectations of how to behave and which practices to implement, as
396 contradictory expectations can cause challenges in adapting to new sociocultural environments
397 (Frank & Stambulova, 2020; Ronkainen et al., 2020). In line with the CTM, he aimed to adapt
398 and facilitate his transition by learning, understanding, and fitting into the new culture and
399 social context by engaging in cultural practices of the performance narrative. The subject
400 positions and meanings associated with elite senior coaching influenced how he projected his
401 future as a coach:

402 When Lena transitioned, she qualified [for] the national team in orienteering. The
403 national team's head coach was the most successful male orienteer of all time. After
404 talking to Lena about the camps and the discussions she had with the national team
405 coach, I felt that I do not have the attributes he has, the drive he has, the commitment
406 he has. I felt he was the opposite of me; he turned all the rocks to make athletes better.
407 He was really logical and analytical. I don't have as much time, and I am bit
408 unorganized and unstructured. It was the same in skiing as well; junior national team
409 coaches were really organized and analytical, and they had been successful as senior
410 coaches as well. During the transition, I compared myself to other coaches. Although I
411 knew that I had the education, I did not have the experience, or I had not been as an
412 athlete in these environments or in the teams or worked as a senior coach before or
413 living the elite sport narrative myself.

414 At the same time, Lena pressured Jakob to climb the ranks. However, the adaptation
415 process was challenging, and Jakob was so insecure that he asked Lena whether she wanted
416 him to continue as her coach. In this phase, Lena guided him by giving him information on
417 elite sports practices, and the relationship developed throughout the transition and relational
418 learning. Jakob was simultaneously building his adaptability skills to become more concerned
419 and curious regarding his career as a coach. As Ryba et al. (2020) show, the acute cultural

420 phase can be extremely challenging and mentally taxing. A sense of insecurity has been
421 identified in transitions from one position to another. As Jakob had resented the cultural norms
422 of elite sports as a junior coach, being in that mental mode was unproductive, hindering the
423 flow of his psychosocial adjustment. Chroni et al. (2020) found that coaches felt uncertainty
424 over the transition from athlete to coach and needed to renegotiate and determine what it takes
425 to become a good coach, and Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) suggest that uncertainty is eased by
426 the experience of being an elite athlete in a given sport. Jakob, however, had no experience of
427 working in the elite sports environment or being an elite athlete. Also, he had access only to
428 the narrative resources derived from a uniform career narrative of elite athlete coaches, which
429 left him unprepared for the transition as described by Ronkainen et al. (2020), who note that
430 the dominant narrative may prevail if narrative resources are limited. Consequently, in line
431 with Ronkainen et al.'s (2020) study, Jakob did not explore any alternative coaching
432 trajectories. As Lena showed satisfactory results as a junior, Jakob considered that she would
433 need a full-time coach.

434 **Mentor—Sociocultural Adaptation: Drawing on Qualification and Development**

435 During his sociocultural adaptation, Jakob needed to reconstruct the meaning of being
436 a senior coach. His ways of approaching the senior coach subject position conflicted
437 personal values and identity as a coach. He felt he was thrown on shaky ground, where his
438 belief systems and practice manual did not work and needed rewriting. He needed to resolve
439 the tension of being a senior coach, as there was a disequilibrium between the elite sport
440 performance narrative and himself. As Potrac et al. (2012) suggest, individuals at the local level
441 can reject the dominant narratives as Jakob did to preserve feelings of personal authenticity
442 and to subjectively define what a good career is and what success means:

443 After the transition and the first year, which went quite well, as Lena qualified straight
444 to the world championships at the senior level, I began to feel more confident that the

445 way we were doing things actually worked. Of course, she also took control and led;
446 the relationship became more like a mentoring relationship. We were discussing our
447 expectations of each other, what things worked, and how we should work. It is a
448 dynamic relationship nowadays; when she has more things going on in life, she takes
449 more control to maintain the balance. When there is additional time, I take more control
450 of setting the plan. I needed to reconsider the reasons why I started to coach in the first
451 place. I wanted to assist Lena in reaching her potential and goals, improve her longevity,
452 possibility achieve her desired results while having a balanced and meaningful life, and
453 help her learn about herself.

454 Despite his insecurity in adapting to a new social context, Jakob drew on his knowledge
455 from education, research, and his expert position at [various](#) sports organizations in Finland.
456 Chroni et al. (2020) suggest that academic coaches draw on cultural capital that emphasizes
457 high-prestige coach education and convincing combinations of theory and practice. [Jakob's](#)
458 knowledge of physiology and coaching, for example, assisted in [formulating Lena's](#) practices
459 and training plans. [The](#) adaptation was [also](#) facilitated by his athletes' [results](#) and their
460 development during the transition years. Although the transition from the junior to the senior
461 level is considered the hardest (Stambulova, 2017), Lena had a successful transition. During
462 the acute cultural adaptation, Jakob relied on narrative resources associated with the normative
463 career pathways to elite-level position and [with](#) controlling coaching behavior to play a senior
464 coach role. However, as Lena was his first athlete to undergo this transition, developmental
465 change required the involvement of an individual with experience (Sameroff, 2009) [as well as](#)
466 [becoming more self-aware of the cultural norms \(Graham & Blackett, 2022\).](#)

467 The CTM (Ryba et al., 2016) shows that the phases of transition do not assume a linear
468 progression in psychological adaptation, highlighting the dynamic nature of sociocultural
469 adaptation. For example, although Jakob had transitioned to [a](#) senior coach position, he

470 [achieved](#) an equilibrium between himself and the elite sports world [thanks to diverse](#) cultural
471 models that [aided](#) the adaptation process. The model of elite sports he [observed in](#) Norway
472 differed from that of Finland's sports culture (Strom & Nielsen, 2022), [which](#) also increased
473 Jakob's confidence as a senior coach:

474 What actually helped me to get into a senior coaching role was my experiences from
475 abroad, from Norway and the United States, where things were done [\[a\]](#) bit differently
476 compared to Finland. They emphasized the same values and principles that I drew upon.
477 Even in senior sports, it was not all about the performance narrative. It required
478 evidence-based practices, teamwork, learning, supporting well-being, and
479 responsibility. Of course, I gained experience from these trips abroad and conversations
480 with peer coaches who supported me and told me that I was doing the right things as a
481 coach. These experiences increased my feelings of control and confidence.

482 Ryba et al. (2016) suggest that, depending on [one's](#) subjective career and life goals,
483 sociocultural adaptation [may be prolonged or not happen](#). Although Jakob had adapted to the
484 new subject position, the transition was still more or less incomplete:

485 I still construct my career as a senior coach. I see myself as developing as a senior coach
486 and learning from the process and from my relationship with Lena. In this way, she would
487 be able to develop as well. Of course, I still struggle a bit with the idea of whether I should
488 be a certain kind of coach, especially when visiting high-performance centers or talking
489 with professional coaches. But I am quite comfortable with the idea that I am the coach I
490 am, that I have the personality I have, and that the way I have been working as a coach has
491 led to good results.

492 In the end, Jakob and Lena co-constructed the meaning of their athlete-coach
493 relationship and agreed that Jakob acted as a mentor [to](#) Lena. [This co-construction of meaning](#)
494 [also shaped the dyad's power relationship. Instead of demonstrating controlling coaching](#)

495 behavior according to the elite sport narrative, Jakob's self-reflexivity and meaning
496 construction problematized cultural norms and taken-for-granted assumptions that had shaped
497 his behavior in the phase of acute cultural transition as suggested by Downham and Cushion
498 (2022). This collaborative reconstruction of meanings also helped the dyad reach performance
499 goals and maintain development. In the transition from the junior to senior level, both Jakob
500 and Lena went through individual processes, but they also created a shared reality that informed
501 and motivated them throughout the process. Their experiences were interdependent, as they
502 influenced and supported each other along the way. Relational transition can be seen as
503 intertwined with the subjective repositioning of the dyad. The changes in their subjective
504 positions and self-stories can impact the dynamics and outcomes of the transition process.
505 Central to relational transition is the understanding that the (re)construction of meanings and
506 cultural practices occurs through interactions with repositioning. In other words, as individuals
507 navigate their cultural transitions, they socially reposition and engage in interactions within the
508 sociocultural field that shapes their understanding and interpretation of the new cultural
509 practices. These interactions and repositioning processes are vital for the reconstruction of
510 meanings and the successful adaptation to a new cultural context.

511 **Practical Implications**

512 To assist coaches, especially youth coaches, in designing and constructing their careers
513 and preparing for transitions not only from one position to another but from one sociocultural
514 environment to another, it is necessary to support coaches in planning and exploring their future
515 career trajectories. The CTM model (Ryba et al., 2016) offers a useful framework for this aim.
516 For example, in the pre-transition phase, coaches are encouraged to actively prepare for the
517 transition by learning about not only the required competencies and skills but also the social
518 norms and cultural expectations of the environment to which they are transitioning. Therefore,
519 rather than normative career stories and an understanding of elite coach positions as a measure

520 of success, versatile career stories are needed so that youth coaches can construct subjectively
521 meaningful careers. For example, the narrative data presented here could be disseminated to
522 [inspire coaches](#) to address sociocultural competencies (Callary et al., 2022; Szedlak et al.,
523 2020). [Especially in acute cultural transition](#), more targeted education is needed so that coaches
524 transitioning to senior roles are [equipped](#) with knowledge and relevant practices to [meet](#) the
525 demands of a new role and [to](#) negotiate cultural practices. [In addition, Lee et al. \(2020\) suggest](#)
526 [that CAE can be an effective practice of critical reflection among sports psychology actors.](#)
527 [Therefore, the present study also provides an example of how coaches can be encouraged to](#)
528 [use CAE to critically reflect on social context by examining their personal experience.](#)

529 [Achieving sociocultural adaptation may be deemed important, as it implies](#)
530 [psychological adjustment to the community and predicts career longevity and well-being \(Ryba](#)
531 [et al., 2016\).](#) [To aid](#) adaptation to senior coaching positions (or other position transitions),
532 future interventions with coaches should focus on their self-reflexivity of becoming critically
533 aware [of which](#) sociocultural narratives make their views intelligible [and](#) whether [they](#) are
534 authentically aligned with their subjective [understanding](#) of a good career, a good coach, and a
535 good coach-athlete relationship. This could also be facilitated by [coach education and by](#)
536 [environments \(such as teams and clubs\) that](#) acknowledge and accept differences in career and
537 personal development by supporting agency during the transition. In addition, the transitions
538 of both athletes and coaches could be facilitated by co-constructing the expectations and
539 meanings of their respective careers. Encouraging the dyad to develop critical awareness of
540 their own subject positions and [to](#) reflect on their relational experiences can facilitate the
541 process of relational transition to the new sociocultural context. [To problematize ideas about](#)
542 [coaching, the narrative data presented here also illustrate the coach's behaviors with the athlete,](#)
543 [which could provide a lens for athletes to critically examine cultural norms and practices in](#)
544 [sports. Thus, it may be important for coach development to facilitate and support self-](#)

545 awareness regarding changing positions and respective cultural assumptions in interaction with
546 athletes as also highlighted by Graham and Blackett (2022), McMahon et al. (2019), and
547 Downham and Cushion (2022), which could support progress toward sustainable and ethical
548 practices.

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Conclusion

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This article analyzed autoethnographic data from a male coach who transitioned from junior to senior-level coaching, focusing on the relational transition of the coach with his athlete, how he perceived and narratively constructed his subject positions during the transition, and the transition's mechanisms in a broader social and cultural field. We argue that the dominant narratives of elite sports and his relationship to the athlete shaped the coach's subject position, from which he projected his future career as a coach during the transition. It is important to recognize that the coach and athlete both went through an individual process of transition; however, they were interconnected and influenced each other. Transitioning from junior to senior coaching also means transitioning in a sociocultural environment that highlights the cultural transition. Social repositioning, negotiation of cultural practices, and meaning construction facilitate the transition and may assist in maintaining subjective authenticity. It must be acknowledged that the relational transition in team sports may differ from that in individual sports, as there are varying practices, and more athletes are involved in the transition process as noted by Stamp et al. (2023). However, performance narratives and beliefs related to elite sport assumptions imbue both individual and team sports environments (Careless & Douglas, 2013), highlighting the importance of reconstructing meanings in the transition and in adaptation to the new environment. Lastly, it is important to consider how the performance narrative influences coaches' career trajectories and practices and to take into account the relational context of athletes in coaches' career development.

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