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The meaning of difficulties in career narratives: the case of sports graduates

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Abstract

As the careers of today are no longer typically stable and predictable, people should expect to encounter many challenges during their working life. The present study aimed to explore the meaning of difficulties in modern career-themed life narratives. A total of 54 Finnish sports graduates' narratives were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify the meanings attributed to difficulties. Findings revealed that difficulties both shaped the plot and initiated multiple types of reflections in the narratives. The paper suggests that difficulties should be considered as a meaningful part of career narratives and discusses the application of the findings in career counselling.

Keywords Meaning of difficulties · Career narrative · Reflexive thematic analysis

Résumé

La signification des difficultés dans les récits de carrière : Le cas des diplômés en sport Les carrières d'aujourd'hui n'étant plus typiquement stables et prévisibles, les gens doivent s'attendre à rencontrer de nombreux défis au cours de leur vie professionnelle. La présente étude visait à explorer la signification des difficultés dans les récits de vie modernes ayant pour thème la carrière. Cinquante-quatre récits de sportifs finlandais diplômés ont été analysés à l'aide d'une analyse thématique réflexive afin d'identifier les significations attribuées aux difficultés. Les résultats ont révélé que les difficultés ont à la fois façonné l'intrigue et initié de multiples types de réflexions dans les récits. L'article suggère que les difficultés devraient être considérées comme une partie significative des récits de carrière et discute de l'application des résultats dans l'orientation professionnelle.

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Zusammenfassung

Die Bedeutung von Schwierigkeiten in Karriereerzählungen: Der Fall der Sportabsolventen Da die Karrieren von heute nicht mehr typischerweise stabil und vorhersehbar sind, sollten die Menschen damit rechnen, während ihres Arbeitslebens vielen Herausforderungen zu begegnen. Ziel der vorliegenden Studie war es, die Bedeutung von Schwierigkeiten in modernen karrierethematischen Lebenserzählungen zu untersuchen. Vierundfünfzig Erzählungen finnischer Sportabsolventen wurden mit Hilfe einer reflexiven thematischen Analyse analysiert, um die Bedeutungen zu ermitteln, die Schwierigkeiten zugeschrieben werden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Schwierigkeiten sowohl die Handlung prägen als auch verschiedene Arten von Reflexionen in den Erzählungen auslösen. Der Beitrag schlägt vor, Schwierigkeiten als bedeutungsvollen Teil von Karriereerzählungen zu betrachten und diskutiert die Anwendung der Ergebnisse in der Karriereberatung.

Resumen

El significado de las dificultades en las narrativas de carrera: El caso de los graduados deportivos Dado que las carreras profesionales de hoy en día ya no son típicamente estables y predecibles, las personas deben esperar encontrarse con muchos retos durante su vida laboral. El objetivo del presente estudio era explorar el significado de las dificultades en las narrativas de la vida profesional moderna. Se analizaron las narrativas de cincuenta y cuatro graduados deportivos finlandeses mediante un análisis temático reflexivo para identificar los significados atribuidos a las dificultades. Los resultados revelaron que las dificultades configuraron la trama e iniciaron múltiples tipos de reflexiones en las narraciones. El artículo sugiere que las dificultades deberían considerarse una parte significativa de las narrativas profesionales y analiza la aplicación de los resultados en el asesoramiento profesional.

Introduction

In today's world, work, identities, and wellbeing are intertwined (Kira & Balkin, 2014). At the extreme, perceived career failure can contribute to serious consequences, such as death by suicide (Duff & Chan, 2014). Thus, understanding the nature of difficulties is an important perspective in career counselling. Pryor and Bright (2012) have pointed out that most career development research has focussed on success, even though failure is part of reality and should be normalized and even valued. In their theoretical study, they outlined possible benefits of failure with regard to career development, suggesting that failures may build strategy, are a learning opportunity, and may encourage creativity and personal development. While difficult career experiences have received growing attention in recent years, there has still been little empirically informed discussion about the meaning of difficulties in career development.

Constancy and predictability of jobs and careers is no longer the default in the modern world of work (Amundson et al., 2014; Baruch, 2004; Lo Presti, 2009; Lyons et al., 2015; Savickas, 2012). Globalization and digitalization have rapidly

changed career development from a linear scenario to insecurity and complexity. For individuals, this manifests as challenges in the balance of work and private life, the demand for continuous self-development, an increase in temporary contracts, and the need for self-employment (Amundson et al., 2014; Savickas, 2012). Further, these challenges are reflected in careers as multiple career transitions and non-linear career trajectories (Savickas, 2012; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). Individuals can therefore no longer rely on landing on a stable career with long-term prospects, but should expect to experience many shifts, turns and challenges in their career development. Multiple theoretical attempts have been made to better recognize the complexity of modern careers (Amundson et al., 2014).

Pryor and Bright (2003, 2014) have criticized many career development theories for still assuming that career development is based on rational and controlled decision-making while the reality is complex, dynamic, and includes many unpredictable events. They included these elements into their chaos theory of careers (CTC), which sees individuals as well as their environments as complex, open and adaptive systems that are in interaction with other systems (Pryor & Bright, 2003, p. 16). The career development of the individual is thus affected by, for example, other people, organizations, social environments and unplanned events. This interaction creates more complexity and unpredictability, as these systems influence each other. Important elements in CTC are also change and chance (Pryor & Bright, 2003). Each system, both the individual and the environments, are in constant change, and random events also influence how a career is formed. Consequently, career decisions and actions may have repercussions that are difficult to predict, and thus, individuals 'should expect to fail quite regularly when navigating such complexity' (Pryor & Bright, 2012, p. 70).

While these other influences are significant, people simultaneously can act purposefully and build their careers. This has to do with the constructive nature of humans, acknowledged in CTC. The theory assumes that individuals interpret themselves, their experiences and their environments (Pryor & Bright, 2003). This interpretation then affects thoughts and actions, and therefore influences how the career takes shape. CTC views that careers are formulated in the interactive process between the individual and the environments, where the individual is influenced by other systems and can correspondingly act and react. CTC notes that while career development is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to predict, there is still some order in it (Pryor & Bright, 2003). Like the weather, it is impossible to predict accurately in the long term, but there are some patterns that can be recognized and utilized (Pryor & Bright, 2008). In summary, CTC combines the perspectives of outside influences (the context) and their unpredictability with internal meaning-making activities (constructiveness) as influential in career development. This is one of the starting points in the present study. It is accompanied by narrative approach, which has been suggested as a functional solution for understanding modern careers. People have a tendency to construct their experiences and aspirations into stories (Amundson et al., 2014; Bruner, 1996; Pryor & Bright, 2008; Savickas, 2005). Moreover, as discussed above, career decisions are not made in a vacuum, and it is therefore necessary to also acknowledge the rest of the life of the individual as a whole, that is, the context in which these decisions are made (Pryor & Bright, 2012,

p. 4). For example, one study of non-returning US college students showed that the difficulties experienced by students were often non-academic (Martin, 2017).

As well as career theories, career counselling practice has also focussed on success (Pryor & Bright, 2012). Over the past decade, however, some advancements in acknowledging difficult experiences in career counselling have taken place and the value of narrative approaches has been recognized in practice. McIlveen (2014), for example, has suggested using hope narratives as interventions for failure, while Toporec and Cohen (2017) have illustrated how individuals with difficult employment histories may benefit from strength-based narrative counselling.

Due to the previous reasons, we utilize life stories to examine careers in the field of sports. A life story is a narrative in which the person constructs a coherent account of their meaningful experiences (McAdams, 2001). Individuals have multiple life stories depending on the focus of the story, and these can be referred to as topical life stories (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011, p. 335; Plummer, 2001, p. 26). In this study, the life stories were told from the career perspective. An important benefit of life stories in career research is that they also allow for individuals to include any relevant elements, such as other people or random occurrences, in the story, as expected by CTC. In the present study, we use the term narrative when referring to the complete textual manifestation of the story, while the term story is used when referring to the sequence of events (the plot) in the narrative (Ryan, 2005, p. 347).

Meaning of difficulties in career development

In the present study, we use the term difficulty in its broadest sense. Here, it refers to all events or situations where something is hard to do, deal with or understand (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), and includes related terms that have been used in career research, such as challenges (e.g. McAlpine & Amundsen, 2015), failure (e.g. Pryor & Bright, 2012), career stagnation (e.g. Abele et al., 2012), and career barriers (e.g. Ulas & Yildirim, 2019). Furthermore, the present definition is not limited to difficulties of work and career, but also includes personal life events such as illnesses.

Trevor-Roberts et al. (2019) approached meaning of difficulties in career narratives by focussing on uncertainty. They found that meanings of uncertainty could be presented as a continuum from purely negative to mainly positive. Some perceived uncertainty as something to be avoided, while others seemed indifferent to it. Some preferred stability but were energized by uncertainty, and some even thrived on and actively sought uncertainty. As individuals perceived the meaning of uncertainty differently, they also reacted to it with different responses. Their findings provided insight into the variety of meanings, both negative and positive, that individuals attribute to career-affecting phenomena that have been generally assumed to be negative. The present study aims to continue this line of research by expanding it to any difficult experiences in the career narratives.

Few studies have investigated the meaning of difficulties in career development in any systematic way. Regarding students, there are some previous studies that have touched on the issue. Di Palma and Reid (2019) found that students' difficult experiences were important in their career development narratives, creating turning points

and sparking motivation. Another positive meaning attributed to difficulties was reported by Salmela and Määttä (2015), who reported that one of the coping mechanisms for straight-A graduates was perceiving difficulties as promoters of self-knowledge and self-appreciation. It is evident that difficulties also have negative effects. A study among Turkish university students demonstrated that perceived career barriers decreased career decision-making self-efficacy (Ulas & Yildirim, 2019). UK students in the field of sport have been reported to lose confidence in gaining graduate employment towards the end of their studies due to perceived barriers (Beaumont et al., 2016). Moving to post-graduate studies, McAlpine et al. (2012) studied doctoral students whose roads to completion were challenging. Negative emotions and mental challenges as well as career path changes and increase in self-confidence were perceived to follow difficulties. One research branch in this area is failure within business and entrepreneurship (e.g. bankruptcy). Ucbasaran et al. (2013) conducted a systematic literature review to examine the outcomes of business failures, as well as how entrepreneurs made sense of these failures. They discussed the financial, social and psychological costs of failure, such as debt, divorce and negative emotions, but also reviewed processes of learning and sensemaking related to business failure. They concluded that while a business failure is an opportunity to learn, it is also a situation where learning is difficult, and argued that it is important to understand how people cope with a terminated career path and proceed to construct new paths. They suggested that future research should explore the issue from a career path perspective as well (pp. 188–189).

To date, it seems that most research on difficulties in the career context has focused on identifying these challenges. For example, in academia, challenges experienced by early career researchers (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2015) and career barriers experienced by female academics in the UK (Westoby et al., 2021) and in medicine (Zakaras et al., 2021) have been reported. As to populations with additional challenges, Sefora and Ngubane (2021) have discussed career barriers of students with disabilities. Another related research interest has been difficulties within work. For example, Harrowell et al. (2018) suggested that work-related failures can improve practice and outcomes in qualitative geographical field research. McKay (2016) identified challenges of inclusive education for beginning teachers. Such approaches, however, have failed to address what meanings are attributed to difficulties from a broader career perspective.

Overall, two important themes emerge from the studies discussed so far. Firstly, difficulties within the context of career are not limited to work-related events and neither is their influence limited only to work. Personal and professional aspects of life are very much intertwined, supporting the idea of acknowledging the rest of a person's life when studying career development. Secondly, the studies imply that difficult experiences might have multiple functions in people's sensemaking, some of them possibly advantageous for career development.

Context and aim

To investigate the meaning of difficulties in modern career narratives, this study examined the case of sports graduates. The sports industry is a pertinent example of modern careers, as it is characterized by high levels of seasonal, part-time and temporary

employment (Bernal-García et al., 2018; Campos-Izquierdo et al., 2016; Minten & Forsyth, 2014). As a consequence, sports graduates' careers are heterogeneous and dynamic. Many hold multiple jobs, have to cope with employment insecurity and end up flexibly working in several positions both in and out of the sports industry (Bernal-García et al., 2018; Campos-Izquierdo et al., 2016; Minten & Forsyth, 2014; Purdy et al., 2017). In addition, the sports industry labour market is deregulated by nature, which means that the workforce without sport-related education competes for the same jobs (Kaiser & Beech, 2012, pp. 292, 297–298). Sports graduate employment is further complicated as coaching awards granted by sport associations are often more appreciated by employers than degree studies (Hall et al., 2019; Turner & Nelson, 2009). Previous research has reported high rates of sports graduates acquiring additional qualifications (Bernal-García et al., 2018; Sleap & Reed, 2006) and seeking employment in other industries (Jama et al., 2021; Schwab et al., 2015; Sleap & Reed, 2006).

The previously mentioned challenges also apply to Finnish sports graduates. The participants of the present study all hold a Finnish sports degree. Sports degree education in Finland is offered by three types of educational institution: vocational schools, universities of applied sciences and (traditional) universities (Ministry of Education and Culture and Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018). Vocational schools offer upper secondary-level degree studies, while universities of applied sciences and universities offer bachelor's and master's studies. Universities of applied sciences have a practical emphasis, whereas universities focus on scientific efforts and also offer doctoral studies. While the degree studies have different profiles, in practice there is overlap in the labour market (Ala-Vähälä, 2012, p. 43; Vuolle, 2013, p. 53). The degree studies prepare graduates for tasks such as sport instructing, health promotion through physical activity, event organizing, coaching, sport management, administration and physical education teaching (Finnish National Agency for Education, n.d., 2018; University of Jyväskylä, n.d.).

In our previous analysis of modern career narratives, (Jama et al. 2021) we found that most graduates described having encountered difficulties in their career, but there was variation in how the challenges were perceived and how the graduates reacted to them. Some graduates experienced negative emotions, while others seemed to thrive regardless of the difficulties. This called for further exploration. Considering all of the evidence presented in this section, narratives may be a useful tool for counselling when discussing difficult experiences, yet there is still little systematic understanding of what meanings are attributed to difficulties in career narratives. This calls for further exploration. Hence, the present study set out to further our understanding on the issue and aimed to answer the research question: What meanings do difficulties have in sports degree graduates' career-themed life narratives?

Method

Procedure

This study utilizes a qualitative, data-driven approach. We approached our research question from a paradigmatic narrative perspective. Polkinghorne (1995, p. 13) has

described this as analysis of narratives that aims to find common themes or conceptual expressions within the data. The data collection was based on the idea that when creating life narratives people have to select what they share, as it is impossible to include everything they have experienced in one story (McAdams, 2001, p. 110). Therefore, individuals select what is meaningful for them so that the story is complete and makes sense for them, and only the most meaningful events and reflections are constructed into the story. Hence, career in this study is understood subjectively: not as an objective description of career events but as a cohesive story that is meaningful for the individual (Savickas, 2005). Pryor and Bright (2003) have noted that even inaccurate constructions may influence career development, and in this way it is not necessary to evaluate whether the events recalled are true objectively speaking. The process of analysis was inductive, and reflexive thematic analysis was used. The data collection and analysis processes are described in detail in the following sections.

Participants and materials

The data included 54 written life narratives from the career perspective. As sports degree graduates were chosen as the population of this study, participant recruitment was directed to relevant mediums to reach them. An open invitation to participate was sent out to alumni lists of educational institutions, worker's unions and social media. The inclusion criteria were a vocational, bachelor's, or master's degree in sport and year of graduation between 2004 and 2015. The chosen timeframe aimed to ensure that all degree titles included in the study were in their current form, and that of all the participants had had a minimum of 2 years to settle into life after graduation. The data were collected as a part of a larger project that aimed to understand education and work life experiences of sports graduates, which influenced the criteria set for the participants by determining the desired graduation year range.

The participants were asked to write their life story from the perspective of their career. In line with the assumptions of the chaos theory of careers, the instructions mentioned that they could write about any events, people, choices and thoughts that they felt were relevant in the formation of their career path. They were encouraged to write freely, focusing on what they themselves found relevant, and not to think that they should write in a certain way or about certain issues. Auxiliary questions were included only for prompting. The prompts were general questions about education and work, such as 'What have you studied?' and 'What are the most important achievements or turning points in your career?' The prompts did not include any mention of difficulties or failures. Thus, in the analysis, it was assumed that when difficulties were shared, they were meaningful for the writer in some way. Age, gender, completed degrees and current work status in the sports industry were asked for background information. In total, 68 responses were submitted, of which 60 met the criteria of the degree and graduation year and were in story format (had a plot). Finally, six narratives were excluded during the initial phases of analysis as they did not include any indication of difficulties.

The length of the final 54 narratives varied between 46 and 1946 words, averaging at 540 words. Of the 54 participants, 34 (63%) identified as female, 20 (37%) as male, and 0 (0%) as other. Age of the participants ranged from 22 years to 51 years, the median being 31 years. The professional background information of the participants is presented in Table 1. The background information illustrates the non-linear and individual nature of educational and career choices of today. In addition to many participants reporting having degrees in other fields outside sports, 15 participants reported that they held more than one degree in sports. This number does not include people who reported having both a bachelor's and master's degree from a university, as in Finland a bachelor's-level university degree is typically considered an intermediate stage of master's studies and most people with university master's degrees only reported a master's degree. The purpose of the collected background information was to provide context. The analysis focussed on the shared meanings across the data and no comparisons between participants were made.

Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, as this method fits theoretically with narrative data and allows interpreting patterns of similarities and differences in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021). The analytic process started with data familiarization, in which the data were read through several times. Initial ideas for coding were noted while re-reading the data. In the next step, more formal coding took place. Each narrative was read through again and descriptions of difficulties were identified and marked. Then, each narrative was further examined to identify what meanings were attributed to the difficulties in the narrative. Using the Atlas.ti 9 software, these meanings (such as 'career crashed into a wall' or 'learned what not to do') were coded.

After the coding was completed, attention was shifted to a broader level and the codes were organized visually to generate initial themes. Themes in reflexive

Table 1 Professional background information of the participants

	Of 54 participants
Highest completed sports degree	
Vocational	11 (20%)
Bachelor's	26 (48%)
Master's	16 (30%)
Doctorate	1 (2%)
Degree in other career field as well	
Yes	22 (41%)
No	32 (59%)
Current field	
In sports industry	31 (57%)
Not in sports industry	13 (24%)
Other (e.g. partly in sports industry)	10 (19%)

thematic analysis do not refer to topics discussed in the data, but should be understood as shared meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). Initial themes included ideas such as 'career shift' and 'thankfulness'. The themes were then reviewed and refined by considering data extracts in each theme as well as the themes related to each other and to the overall dataset. Analysis was a circular process in which refining required returning to previous steps in the analysis. Finally, themes were named and defined in writing to highlight and clarify the essence of each theme.

Following the ideas of life story research, meanings conveyed by both the plot and the reflective element of the narrative were considered during the analysis. The plot is composed of the individual events in the story. Through the plot, relationships between individual events become visible, making it possible to understand the narrative meaning of individual events (Polkinghorne, 1995). The reflective elements in the texts, on the other hand, are not part of the plot, as they are not events in the story. The purpose of the reflective sections is to show to the reader how the events should be understood (Linde, 1993, pp. 21, 71–72; Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 17). The purpose of the analysis was not to separate meanings conveyed by plot and reflective sections from each other, but it became subsequently clear that these elements had different emphases in different themes. This is further clarified in the following section in which the findings are presented.

Findings

On the basis of the data, five themes were generated. The themes describe different meanings for difficulties in the narratives. The first theme focusses entirely on the plot, while the second and third themes combine plot and reflective elements. The last two themes focus on the reflections on the stories. The five themes and their relation to narrative elements of plot and reflection are illustrated in Figure 1.

Analysing the described difficulties was not the focus of this study, but they were identified for understanding the context. The data included a broad variety of difficulties that can roughly be divided into three categories: professional, self-related and contingencies. Professional difficulties included both general observations of disadvantages of the industry (such as poor salaries), limited working opportunities, and specific negative events such as setbacks in studies or problems in employment. Self-related difficulties discussed internal challenges such as difficulties in career planning, negative conceptions of self, and personal failures. Contingencies refer to difficulties in life that appeared random or sporadic, such as illnesses, injuries and family crises. In the following, each of the generated themes of the meanings attributed to difficulties in the stories is discussed in detail.

Difficulties as perceived cause of concrete career and life events

In this theme, the meaning of difficulties was described in terms of concrete events in the life story. The theme included chain reaction type descriptions as well as more straightforward cause and effect descriptions. The significance of these events with
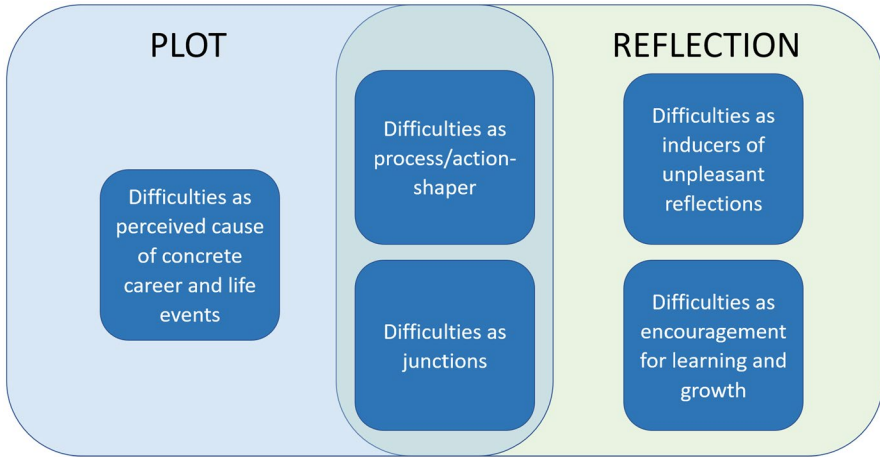
Figure 1 The five themes in relation to elements of plot and reflection

regard to the plot varied. Often, difficulties led to turning points in the story, such as starting or ending entrepreneurship. For some, the events following difficulties were career altering and the difficulties were therefore perceived as causing a complete shift in career path direction either to or from the sports industry. For example, one participant described how shortage of work caused him to change to another industry:

> I spent about 3 years as an hourly worker, where the main focus was in the gym, along with pool lifeguard work and all kinds of other odd jobs. I had to switch to a different field though just to be able to pay my bills (there weren't enough regular hours) and to move forward with my plans (male, 28 years, highest sports degree: Vocational Qualification in Sports Instruction, current status regarding working in the sports industry: not in the sports industry).

Often, changes in plot were not major turning points but still part of the plot, such as a change of job. Some were momentary in nature, such as change in career status, for example, becoming unemployed. In the following example, a temporary change in plot came about due to difficulties that drove the participant to take time out from the industry:

> I worked for [company name] for a year and a half until in spring 2016 the company started labour negotiations and the entire PT [personal training] team was outsourced. I moved out from [location] and became unemployed. At that point I was up to my ears with the sports industry and ready to think about doing something else. I'd also been on sick leave just before the negotiations began because of burnout. The long days with no regular hours took their toll. I was unemployed for 6 months. I travelled a bit and recharged the batteries (female, 28 years, Bachelor's of Sport Studies, currently in the sports industry).

Some of the concrete events described by the writers were not necessarily career related but were more concerned with private life, such as when the perceived outcome was a change in sport or involved relocating.

Difficulties as process/action-shaper

In this theme the meaning of difficulties was visible as a catalyst for the processes described in the stories. The writers described how the challenges faced brought about a change in their thinking, and thus, in their actions. While these descriptions were related to concrete events in the plot, they also involved a reflective element. The focus of attention was on the process rather than the outcomes in the plot, and it is noteworthy that the described reactions were not always considered desirable. This theme involved descriptions such as intentionally shaping one's actions to achieve a certain goal, or slowing or speeding up the pace of study. This is demonstrated in the following quote in which the participant describes how he did not enjoy his studies, and although he did still graduate, the process was changed:

> Because of that, [bachelor's in] sports instructor studies just didn't really feel like a good fit for me. I didn't want to drop them though, because I'd already done half of them by that point. But I really didn't particularly enjoy the studies, so my solution was to speed up the study pace and graduate early [male, 31 years, Bachelor's in Sport Studies, other (student)].

Difficulties as junctions

This theme offers windows to alternative stories. Difficulties were recognized as points where the plot could take or could have taken a different direction. Writers speculated about what might have happened and what could happen in the future. The crossroad events included both questioning of their own choices and external rejections (such as not being admitted to an educational programme or not being selected for a job). Often the considering of alternative turning points included expressions of emotion. For example, one participant described how their aspiration to study to become a class teacher was not fulfilled and how this compelled them to reconsider both their identity and career plans:

> Despite several attempts though, I didn't get accepted into [class teacher] minor or major studies. It was hugely disappointing, not only because I saw myself as a class teacher in the future, but because it also narrowed my job prospects (female, 31 years, Master's in Sport Sciences, currently in the sports industry).

This theme also included descriptions where an outcome happened despite certain difficulties. In these cases individuals reported no specific consequences of the challenges faced, but used expressions (such as 'although/even though', 'but/however', 'fortunately/luckily', still/even so/nevertheless', and 'to my surprise') that revealed that the difficulty was understood as a potential but unrealized turning point

in the story. In the following, one participant describes how their poor success in upper general secondary school might have been a career barrier:

> I was still really worried about my chances of getting into higher education studies as a result of my poor success at high school. My previous studies in sports made my situation easier though. I succeeded well in the selection process and got in to start my studies in autumn 2012 (male, 31 years, Bachelor's in Sport Studies, currently in the sports industry).

Difficulties as inducers of unpleasant reflections

In this theme the difficulties forced the protagonists to face unpleasant emotions and assessments of their own situation. There were three main topics in this theme. Firstly, difficulties were attributed to forming a negative overall view of the sports industry as a whole and/or one's own career possibilities. The writers described how they were tired of the sports industry, lacked career options or were professionally stuck. One participant described the process as leading to career change, and how she felt that a bachelor's-degree holder lost out between the lower and higher educated work force:

> As a sports instructor, though, I ran into a wall at every turn. Being a broadly qualified Bachelor of Sport Studies specialized in coaching wasn't good enough for anything than just odd jobs, where at the moment anybody from anywhere is getting hired to do the same work. As a sports coach, I was bypassed by coaches with 10-year volunteer experience and a second or third level sport-specific coaching qualification, there were no physical training coaches at the time, and a Master's degree was considered needed for top managerial positions or sports federation roles. – Club directors were more likely to be the club's long-term chairperson or some other active member than someone educated in the field. Is the problem with people's attitudes, lack of appreciation for education, or what? I felt like I had the expertise, but there was just no market for it (female, 33 years, Bachelor's in Sport Studies, currently not in the sports industry).

Secondly, difficulties were seen as a cause for negative feelings. Individuals described how difficulties had led to unpleasant feelings such as bitterness, vexation, frustration, umbrage, despair, confusion and shame. For example, one participant reflected on his negative, even 'insulting' experience of searching for work:

> In future, I would like to see people who graduate via the proper schools and with the right qualifications in the sports industry be better appreciated than for example wellness coaches who've done a 4-weekend course. It can sometimes feel pretty insulting that your 5 years of study is ranked equivalent to the training of a Spartan Gear kettlebell instructor [male, 27 years, Bachelor's in Sport Studies, other (in sport-related work in a different field)].

The third topic in this theme discussed how difficulties had forced the protagonists to keep searching for their own place in the professional context. Uncertainty

about the future was present, and a fulfilling career position was not yet achieved. Trial and error was visible in the stories in descriptions of the process of searching for professional interest and direction. Difficulties also caused participants to consider further education or switching to a completely different field. While this might lead to positive changes, the process itself was viewed as a more or less an unpleasant experience. This is illustrated in the following quotation, where one participant describes her weariness at being unable to find satisfying employment:

> At the moment it feels like it isn't or won't be that great or most satisfying a career. But when looking around at new options, there's really nothing else that sparks my interest either (female, 29 years, Bachelor's in Sport Studies, in the sports industry).

Difficulties as encouragement for learning and growth

The last theme highlights the positive reflections in the narratives. The difficulties challenged people in a way that was perceived to lead to learning and growth. This theme continues where the previous theme ended: from searching for one's path to finding one's path. In this theme, the writers described how difficulties have made it possible for them to find their own place in the world of work, professional interest, or a route towards these. Here, one participant describes her journey, which started with a clear vision of a dream job as a physical education teacher, but ended with finding her true passion in another profession after failing selection for a university PE teacher education programme and working in the industry with a lower level of education:

> I started to feel the sports industry isn't part of me any more. – The idea to train as a student counsellor started floating around back when I was doing my Open University studies in education. The idea grew stronger year after year and, in [year], I decided to apply to a Master's degree programme as a guidance counsellor. I got in, and now here we are with my thesis kind of half way through and a couple of teaching practices still to go. But I've been really pleased with the switch. It's been a long journey to this point, but I feel like I've found my place (female, 29 years, Bachelor's in Sport Studies, currently not in the sports industry).

Difficulties taught individuals about themselves, often through finding out what they did not enjoy doing. Many reflected on their learning from difficulties by sharing advice in their narratives, either for other people, or by explaining what they would do differently if they had the chance to relive the process. Learning and growth after difficulties also became visible in terms of more concrete skills. Many described how difficult experiences had enhanced their professional development or led them to situations where they gained new competences. In addition to professional skills, personal growth was also often achieved through difficulties, for example, when difficulties were seen as a strengthening or humbling experience, as illustrated by the following participant who initially struggled in her international studies:

The studies were really tough at first though, my English was far from adequate at first, I didn't understand people's humour, I was an outsider, I was in the university swimming team but I didn't feel like I belonged to it. I eventually found my own circle though and the experience as a whole strengthened me massively (female, 33 years, Master's in Sport Sciences, currently in the sports industry).

Another way of learning about difficulties was the different perspectives that they offered. Negative experiences allowed individuals to appreciate their achievements in contrast to previous challenges.

Now, with more than 5 years' experience, I can look back a bit on my career so far. I'm grateful that I've never once been unemployed. Getting enough work in our field is not a given, and it definitely wasn't when I graduated in 2013 (female, 32 years, Master's in Sport Sciences, currently in the sports industry)

Discussion

The present study provided a systematic view of the perceived meaning of difficulties in career narratives. Five different meanings of difficulties were identified in the career-themed life narratives of sports graduates: (1) difficulties as a perceived cause of concrete career and life events, (2) difficulties as process/action-shaper, (3) difficulties as junctions, (4) difficulties as inducers of unpleasant reflections, and (5) difficulties as encouragement for learning and growth. In conclusion, difficulties shaped the plot of the career story and initiated reflection.

While there is little previous systematic understanding of the meaning of difficulties in career narratives, overall, these findings are in agreement with those of previous studies. The first theme demonstrated the perceived effects of difficulties on concrete events in career development, and how some of the changes were seen as career-altering. This finding is in agreement with that of Di Palma and Reid (2019), who pointed out that difficulties can serve as turning points in careers. This is also reflected in the second theme, where difficulties were seen as a catalyst for changes in processes. This theme highlights how the individuals have ways of being active in their own career development by reacting to difficulties that they encounter. Similarly, the third theme, difficulties as junctions, opens windows to alternative, unrealized stories. This allows reflecting on the conditions and choices that lead to the story going one way instead of the other, making it possible to understand how personal actions have previously affected one's career path, as well as how they may in the future. Previously, work by Purdy et al. (2017) discussed how sport workers use their agency in the uncertain employment environment of coaching.

Overall, many of the participants in this study attributed positive consequences to difficulties. Focusing on uncertainty, Trevor-Roberts et al. (2019) have previously demonstrated how a career phenomenon that has been supposed to be negative can actually hold different meanings for different individuals, some of them positive. While career difficulties are in principle a negative phenomenon, the present study suggested that people can make sense of them in a positive way. Skill acquirement,

personal growth, gained perspective, and finding one's true calling or a more suitable career were some of the perceived positive effects of difficulties in the present study. In particular, the theme of difficulties as encouragement for learning and growth highlighted individuals' capabilities to reflect on difficulties in a positive way.

However, individual struggles cannot be lightly dismissed as 'learning experiences'. The negative effects reported in earlier studies (Beaumont et al., 2016; McAlpine et al., 2012; Trevor-Roberts et al., 2019; Ulas & Yildirim, 2019) were also reflected in the present study. The negative perceptions discussed by the participants of this study included negative emotions, giving up a desired career, and negative beliefs about career possibilities. There are still many unanswered questions about the need for additional support for individuals struggling in their careers. While these negative perceptions are common and might serve as a dynamic, it is important to understand how to support individuals in these situations so that prolonged embitterment is avoided (Jama et al., 2021). Similarly, better understanding of the need for support in career transitions is required (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021).

On a more general note, the study supports the ideas of the chaos theory of careers. The difficulties and how they are reflected upon in the data of this study accord with the view that career development theories should not heavily rely on the controlled decision-making of individuals (Pryor & Bright, 2003, 2014). Most narratives in the data would undoubtedly be very different if career development was based on individuals' capabilities and goals. Along this line, Pryor and Bright (2012) have argued that failure is very common and should therefore be acknowledged in career theories and counselling practice. In the present study, only 10% of the narratives collected did not include any discussion of difficult experiences, even though the data collection procedure did not prompt the participants to write about them. On the basis of the data, it seems that difficulties and their consequences are indeed a meaningful feature of modern career narratives. Likewise, consistent with the CTC literature (Pryor & Bright, 2014), the data of this study are in accordance with acknowledging the intertwining of personal and professional in career development. Career-affecting difficulties also included personal events, and career difficulties were perceived to affect personal life.

The chaos theory of careers is not, however, only interested in the unpredictable elements of career development. Pryor and Bright (2008) note that complex dynamic systems are also stable in some ways, as there are patterns that can be found within these systems. This idea is well demonstrated by the metaphor of weather, as it is both limitedly predictable but also unpredictable (Pryor & Bright, 2008). Thus, there is a purpose in searching for these patterns within these systems. The present study illustrates the patterns in how people make sense of difficulties in the context of career development.

Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals make sense of difficulties in their careers in multiple ways. The findings also suggest several tools for counsellors to help individuals create meaningful, cohesive career narratives. Firstly, we promote the idea of not only normalizing and accepting difficulties, but also acknowledging that they are often a meaningful part of an individual's career narrative. Even ongoing negative views and emotions are a force for seeking change.

Secondly, we suggest that recognizing how difficulties affect one's own behaviour and acknowledging alternative, unrealized stories may be cues for understanding agency in career development. While careers are formed in an uncontrollable environment and thus include non-successful phases and elements, individuals are not only victims of circumstances, but also active agents in their careers. Recognizing the coping skills used in previous challenges and crossroads offers tools for the future. Thirdly, we support reflecting on difficulties as a means of promoting learning and growth. These suggestions may be useful for career counselling, as individuals are likely to face difficulties, but may lack ways of understanding their purpose and meaning in their career development.

Beyond career counselling, the findings of the present study help us understand the understudied perspective of difficulties in career development theoretically. While much of the previous academic interest has focussed on success in careers, the present study highlights how difficulties are also a normal and meaningful element of career development. Theoretically, this study also broadens our understanding of a specific group of graduates, that is, sport degree alumni. Previously this group's career development research has mainly focused on employment and employability (e.g. Ala-Vähälä, 2012; Bernal-García et al., 2018; Campos-Izquierdo et al., 2016; Minten & Forsyth, 2014; Turner & Nelson, 2009). The present study acknowledges both the personal and professional elements of life and thus also reminds us of the holistic nature of career development in sport graduates. This perspective is also noteworthy on a policy level, where education and career policymakers should take into account the complexity of human life. For example, in Finland, the contemporary educational policies regarding higher education have been critiqued for not leaving room for individual missteps or detours (see Haltia et al., 2022).

Limitations, quality and future directions

To promote the quality of the present research, we have followed suggestions by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). These include, but are not limited to, acknowledging our theoretical position, making sure that our analysis focusses on shared meanings rather than topics discussed in the data (see Braun & Clarke, 2021, pp. 341–342), clearly reporting the analytic procedure, and using vocabulary suitable for the position of this study. The reflexivity of the research was supported by writing a research journal and through discussions between the authors and also with other scholars. Narrative research and reflexive thematic analysis draw extensively on interpretations made by the researchers (Bold, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2019). It is, however, important to understand that when using reflexive thematic analysis, research subjectivity is seen as a resource, not as a threat to the credibility of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021, pp. 334–335). The suggested findings are one way of understanding the data, which is inevitably based on our cultural and social understanding of the data and theory. Therefore, it is reasonable to share the standpoint of the researchers. We are all Finnish scholars with varied experience in educational and sport sciences. The coding process was carried out by the first author, who holds two degrees in sports and has experience in narrative research.

Similarly, the collected data represent ideas that were produced at a certain time, by a certain group of individuals, and in a specific context. While the age of the participants varied between 22 years and 51 years, the majority of the narratives (45/54) were submitted by individuals between the ages of 27 years and 35 years. Therefore, the findings of this study best represent the experiences of individuals within that age range. The data were collected in Finland in Finnish. Future research could expand our understanding by looking into different cultural contexts, different industries, and narratives in other languages. While the present study looked into meanings of difficulties in narratives, future studies could also look into meaning of difficulties in stories (in contrast to narratives), that is, the plot. The first theme in this study (difficulties as a perceived cause of concrete career and life events) covered a variety of events in personal and professional life worthy of research. Unfortunately, it was not possible to explore this further within the limits of this study.

While there are limitations in the present study, there is potential for generalizability of its findings. Pryor and Bright (2012) have noted that failing is a common feature of careers, and the meanings found in this study are not field-specific. We believe that when reflecting on their career experience, many individuals in their working life, with or without sport degrees, could recognize the meanings presented in this study. All participants in this study held a sport degree, but not all of them worked in the sports industry, and many had degrees in other fields as well. The suggested tools for career counsellors are therefore likely to be beneficial in other contexts with similar conditions, such as the dominance of non-standard employment, and heterogeneous and dynamic careers.

Conclusions

Individuals today often face challenges such as temporary contracts, needing to work in several positions, balancing between work and private life, and multiple career transitions. Therefore, modern careers are often complex and unpredictable. On the basis of the chaos theory of careers, Pryor and Bright (2012) have noted that because of this unpredictability, individuals are likely to experience failures in their careers, but that these might also be beneficial to their career development. By analysing career-themed life narratives of sports graduates, the present study supported this idea by demonstrating that difficulties are meaningful in career narratives in many ways. We conclude that if these difficulties and their meanings are not acknowledged in career development theories and career counselling, many opportunities for meeting individual needs and providing effective career counselling will be missed. The findings of this study highlighted that people reflect on difficulties in multiple ways and suggested that these reflections could be useful in career counselling, as they provide opportunities for seeking change, supporting agency, identifying strengths, and recognizing learning and growth.

The first draft of the manuscript was written by the first author and all authors commented on versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability The data collected for this study will be available in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/en/) after the embargo period.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical approval This study followed the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK). Accordingly, no ethical review statement was needed.

Informed consent To achieve informed consent, participants were invited to participate through a web page that contained information about the purpose, methodology and data handling of the study, as well as contact information. Participants were allowed to either grant or deny permission to archive narratives for further use.

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