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Research Article

Being Young in a Fragmented World: A Literature Review on Stress, Alienation, and the Search for Existential Liberation

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ABSTRACT

Applying existential philosophy, in relation to Martin Heidegger's notions of thrownness, fallenness, and authenticity, the framework provides a hermeneutic insight into what it is to be young in a fragmented world. Instead of synthesizing empirical observations or proposing direct explanations, the review is interpretive and attempts to re-construct the philosophical and academic work on youth stress, alienation and meaning-making. The discussion confronts stress and alienation not just as developmental or psychological issues but as existential conditions which disclose conflicts between externally induced demands and young people's ability to form an authentic self-perception. From literature to scholarship, youth as it transpires across periods not just as a mediatory phase but also as a kind of being-in-the-world involving uncertainty, openness, and a struggle over selfhood. Experiences of disconnection and social pressure may remain widespread but this review underscores how practices of reflection, creativity, and responsibility are part of efforts to live more truthfully in splintered social contexts. By conceptualizing the experience of youth under the existential- hermeneutic lens the article also aims to provide a conceptual understanding of youth distress that does not become problem- orientated or pathologizing, but rather places youth in the center of meaningful becoming under the conditions of contemporary events.

Keywords*: Alienation, Authenticity, Existential Anxiety, Existential Liberation, Identity Formation, Youth Development*

Background

Life today is a lot faster than it used to be. It is therefore not surprising that so many young people feel defeated by all the new technologies, changing cultures and systems that often seem opaque, unpredictable, and structurally misaligned with their capacities (Twenge et al., 2021; McGorry et al., 2025). There is often no coherent or stable frame within which identity formation occurs or which may produce considerable disorientation. This is "liquid modernity," as Eckhardt et al. (2020) describes it: the

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old, outmoded paradigm of how ideas can be translated into what should be done and said by family, community, or others is now fuzzy, disorienting or simply obsolete. This state of liquidity does not simply indicate change but a structural loosening of the stable coordinates through which people once understood themselves and their place in the world. When norms, roles and expectations are fluid and in continuous flux, they no longer provide a coherent horizon for identity formation and thus lead to a lived experience marked by discontinuity and fragmentation. This fluidity in liquid modernity can be understood as such as the very condition that produces the fragmented world interrogated in this study. This has been called a "identity crisis" by Branje et al. (2021), and Schachter and Galliher (2018) explain how the situation becomes worse as youth age and become separated from their communities. They are not only faced with world destruction in social media but also glorification of existence. This together with anxiety, or a sense of helplessness, can easily emerge among social media users (Twenge et al., 2018; Verduyn, 2017). This very emptiness, as Schnell (2010) called a "existential vacuum" — the sense that life is meaningless. Andrews et al. (2016) indicates that this is becoming even more common amongst youth today.

The review focuses on the emergence of stress, alienation and search for inner meaning in the story, research and reflections on youth being a young thing in modern society. Such questions have long been the subject of philosophical and scholarly inquiry including Binder (2022) and Russo-Netzer & Shoshani (2020) what's the point? or Who am I really? —is a rite of passage, particularly when life feels unsteady in a direction. Such conditions can lead to considerable stress among young people who experience multiple sources of pressure from family, school and society. Emotional stress and feeling like a fish out of water. (Lundvall et al, 2021). People can grow up wanting to be accepted by other people because of what is expected of them and forget who they are as humans.

In this study, youth is not seen as a "in-between" phase, but as a dynamic process of being, characterized by openness, curiosity and desire for authenticity (Branje et al., 2021). His notion of "being-there" (Dasein) also allows us to think of youth as a life cycle when you are not merely surviving but rather constructing your life. Young people often rebel against conformity influenced by peer pressure. The data suggest that meaning is not inherited but that we are active constructors, an emergent element in one's engagement with life (Kim et al., 2014). Existential liberation then can be seen as realization of one's self that is able to remain authentic in the unstable bigger social and existential picture. Such growth can be found in youth research especially evident in art, activism as well as in close others, with whom one is deeply felt and bonded (Reed et al., 2020; Lundvall et al., 2022).

Much research has been on the stresses and pressures on young people from peers and school but it does not get to the deeper sense of loss and dislocation that they are feeling. Little attention has been paid to the deeper experiential dimensions of how these young people make sense of the world – how they feel about themselves and where they are, what gives life meaning. This article is meant to provide some of that guidance, by noting, on the basis of a combination of philosophical and practical insight, how the young confront fragmentation and stumble, towards something more complete.

Rooted in this interpretive and existentialist orientation, the review is guided by these exploration-driven questions: (1) What does literature tell us about what it means to be a young person in a world that can be disjointed? (2) How does stress and alienation signal a struggle even deeper with identity, community and truth? (3) What effect does that encouragement have for the young people to seek existential freedom in their life or rebel against social pressure? (4) To consider youth not as a problem to be solved, but as a moment of radical change, in what light can we use philosophy and experience?

This review therefore continues to argue that stress and alienation among the young in our contemporary world should be seen as symptoms and developmental hazards, but as existential signs, of a breach between exter-

nally imposed pressures and the natural capacities of the youth to develop themselves, to write themselves. The article reads a variety of strands of youth research with an existentialist, Heideggerian approach. It argues youth as a condition of becoming where struggle and change go together rather than be against one another. Therefore, in the course of this analysis, youth experience is expressed in a formal academic register that corresponds to the conceptual and philosophical depth of the framework, as opposed to colloquial statements that would be more natural in the vernacular.

Methods

Research Design and Orientation

The study is a theoretical thematic literature review based on the philosophical discourse of Heidegger. The study is about synthesis of evidence rather than testing of hypothesis, but about explaining how research has created and contemplates youth experience. For youth more broadly than specifically for its role on stress, alienation and search for authenticity in social fragmentation. The review is interpretive and phenomenological, focusing on meaning, lived experience, and ontological relevance rather than causal exegesis. Up sensitising suggestions, not prescriptive categories The existential analysis of Heidegger - and its preoccupations with being-in-the-world, thrownness, fallenness, care (Sorge) and authenticity - provided These notions informed the reading of literature by foregrounding the lived, narrated and understood dimensions of youth experience, and not by forcing prescriptive coding structures or a priori classification.

Sources and Selection of Literature

The article found sources were published in peer-reviewed journals covering philosophy, psychology, education, youth studies and mental health. Sources were selected for their theoretical or practical potential in bringing up or promoting discussion of youth stress, alienation, identity construction or well-being; of existential, phenomenological or humanistic ideas about development and making meaning; and of authenticity, conformity or existential anxiety in the contemporary moment. Relevance to theory, richness of theory and cross-discipline diversity rather than exhaustiveness were chosen by selection criteria.

Analytical and Interpretive Process

Analysis was conducted by iterative hermeneutics, i.e. repeated engagement with synthesized literature and conceptual interpretations of philosophically and conceptually relevant sources. Instead of offering blanket coverage, texts were read selectively to foreground common existential concerns, conceptual convergences, and interpretive frictions across the literature. The review was structured through thematic foci such as stress, alienation, conformity, and authenticity, but these themes were not used as inductively coded categories, but rather as a way of making sense of youth. Interpretation increasing in the dialogical relation between philosophical assumptions and their respective empirical and theoretical evidence, the former and the latter both illuminating each other . Where empirical results seemed to conflict with Heideggerian assumptions, these conflicts were not taken to be contradictions but rather interpretive tensions that required further hermeneutic work to reveal underlying existential conditions or alternative formulations of being-in-the-world. This literature has been re-read and re-arranged so as to understand youth not as an isolated developmental object, but rather as a form of being-in-the-world articulated in a contemporary context of social fragmentation.

Reflexivity and Rigor

In line with phenomenological and qualitative methodologies, the author adopted a reflexive stance, understanding the construction of meaning from philosophical conviction and sensibilities regarding youth existential concern. Rigor was maintained by a well-developed conceptual framework, clear assumptions, ongoing readings of works that had been published before the work, and meticulous reporting of how ideas were interpreted. Rather than aiming for objectivity in the positivist way, the study aimed for interpretive credibility and philosophic plausibility.

Scope and Limitations

The paper does not aim to make significant generalization in statistical terms, nor wants to undertake a holistic review of all youth literature in education that is contextual in a conceptual and interpretive manner. Instead, it offers an analytical account that gives prominence to existential attributes that are generally implicit but largely ignored in empirical research. This will thus render the new findings interpretative propositions with the potential to be used to inform future research, theorizing or practice.

Youth and its Promise: Youth as an Existential Condition of Becoming

Youth, in fact, has traditionally been conceived of as a transitional stage, one that lies between requiring others and standing on your own two feet, innocent and responsible. Psychology supports this, as Branje et al. (2021) presents adolescence as a "liminal stage," a sort of in-between time of active identity exploration and struggle with what are likely personally important life values. This process goes beyond the attainment of developmental milestones when moving into adulthood: It is also about asking the real personal questions. Who am I? What's important to me? What kind of life do I want to lead? These are not necessarily simple questions, but they are the ones that give youth such a sense of profound, transformative activity. This activity, from a Heideggerian perspective, is a manifestation of Dasein's fundamental structure as a being who must interpret and project itself within a world of which it did not choose. But those thoughts, in and of themselves, play a big role in how young people see themselves and the world. Such internal inquiry, according to Lundvall et al. (2022), can be viewed as a developmental resource rather than a deficiency, indicating how people interpret and construct their own experiences.

Developmental psychology has recognized adolescence and emerging adulthood as periods of identity exploration, uncertainty, and meaning seeking (Branje et al., 2021). These dynamics are exacerbated in periods of social disintegration, when the forms of guidance, connection, and place the old order offers are less secure. And when it comes to the existentialist question, that questioning is not a sign of a developmental failure so much as an act of humanity, the fundamental work it is to become oneself. According to Lundvall et al. (2022), the inner questioning common to youth reflects an inner strength that embodies developmental potential — a chance to face values, obligations and futures rather than a deficit to be fixed.

For many adolescents, adolescence is an experience with contexts other than their own desires: school expectations, family expectations, socioeconomic precarity. This term, thrownness, is taken from the philosopher Martin Heidegger (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020). The theory now is that we are all born into this world which has not been our own, still have the capacity to create or to produce a new thing out of it- this is called potentiality-for-Being. But this possibility is hidden, for Dasein reverts back into the they-self, in which possibilities are accepted socially rather than elected authentically. Heidegger's answer was not to answer life, but to stand on the edge of what could be. It is not a matter of anxious overdoing or existential depletion but begins from one's situated being and coming to realize ways that matter to one in one's life. Such care (Sorge) is what existential psychology perceives as the prerequisite for really being oneself with responsibility; for self-realization (Binder, 2022; Russo-Netzer, & Shoshani, 2020).

From a psychological, and from an existential, angle, the development of identity in adolescence is an ongoing negotiation between internal motivation and social pressures. Repeatedly empirical research has demonstrated that the process can be a difficult and tortuous one in which we exert emotional effort in the real world; this can be frustrating as well and often leads people into deep feelings of doubt or distress (Berman et al., 2006; Schachter & Galliher, 2018). Authenticity for young people is guided by Heidegger's conceptual framework for grappling with the two contradictory ideas: being an individual of "the they" (as opposed to living in accordance with people's expectations) and ownership of the things individuals are capable of doing (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020). Young people are not in this phase of development and therefore not an "in-between" generation in the

sense that one's destiny or identity is not in the "between."

In fact most young people say they are still in conflict between who they are now, and who they will be. The quest to find out who you are, learned from school, family, social media or even just self pressure becomes difficult, and sometimes can seem a never ending struggle. This is a finding that has been confirmed by a large literature in adolescent psychology in particular, and also implies that identity has become the most critical and emotionally loaded job an individual will ever play in one's lifetime. This process is often characterized by feelings of uncertainty, existential tension and heightened emotional volatility (Berman et al., 2006). But this condition is accompanied by a silent and constant desire for authenticity, for ontological anchoring. This is what Heidegger called authenticity – living not only of one's own accord but of a way that is not the way others want the young to have but of the way one is out of step with who one would ideally become (Suddick et al., 2021). That means getting on one's life path, if one has to, the shape it may take when one looks at one's life, however shaky or difficult it may be.

Identity building is an experience in today's digitally mediated world of comparison, visibility and evaluation. Research shows that social media is a powerful tool for identity development, providing spaces for self-expression to adolescents, but also creating problems around acceptance, self-esteem, and social comparison (Pérez-Torres, 2024; Verduyn et al., 2017). These dynamics are linked to increased anxiety and uncertainty about one's identity especially when self-presentation is more geared toward seeking approval from others than to the experience itself (Twenge et al., 2018). Such conditions exacerbate the development of externally orientated identities in which the self-awareness is mediated more through appraisal and visibility (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020). Likewise, genuine, empathetic educational relationships can help youth overcome adversity and regain a sense of worth, competence, and belonging (Narsico, 2024). Therefore, teachers' educational environments and styles of engagement may also influence youth's perceptions of themselves and their participation in socially mediated learning experiences (Narsico et al., 2023).

It's not like they're barely breathing when they do something that doesn't seem like a cover to them, like reflective writing, or creative expression, or other forms of self-articulation. They're thriving. Youth who participated in expressive activities reported greater mental wellbeing and higher levels of identity and purpose than youth who were inactive in expressive pursuits (Lundvall et al., 2022). That is the kind of growth some psychologists call existential freedom—becoming more genuine even when everything is bewildering or broken in the world. It is an existential-humanistic psychological approach, and it considers authenticity, creativity, personal meaning and personal significance are necessary to mental health (Russo-Netzer & Shoshani, 2020).

But in a context of ongoing stress and uncertainty, research shows that many young people are engaged in expressive, reflective activities that promote resilience, identity coherence, and meaning-making. Peer-reviewed research has identified creative expression – for example writing, visual art and reflective dialogue – as one of the key ways of helping adolescents to navigate adversity (Morison et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2014) including emotional processing, self-awareness and psychological integration. These practices are not just ways of coping, but also existential enactments with which young adults articulate an identity of fragmented states of self and reclaim agency in the face of hardship. Such engagement would be consistent with existential-humanistic psychology, where the commitment to authenticity is cultivated and meaning arises through an individual's relationship to lived experience and meaning is not dictated from something outside (Russo-Netzer & Shoshani, 2020).

What it means to be young, she said, is not just that the children are growing up, but that they need to learn to understand a world they may perceive to be a confusing, unfair or unresponsive one. It is about learning who they are, as they're pulled in so many different directions by school, by family, by social media, by society. At the core of this journey, it is keeping hope that there is a way to be, a way that feels real, even while anything around us seems to

tilt toward conformity. This tension between belonging and authenticity is at the heart of the work of an existential psychologist, who claims that an individual's role concerns should derive from one's subjective values" (Reed et al., 2020).

The tug between belonging and authenticity is a critical existential struggle for the youth. But if from the existential-analytic lens one considers how social norms become ineluctably binding, it is not so much that they are necessarily binding but that blindly observing them eliminates personal responsibility to define ourselves on our own terms. Heidegger describes the they-self as a condition of disengagement from authorship with dominant structures and habitual scripts (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020). Empirical and philosophical studies demonstrate that exposure to these modalities of life correlates with greater anxiety, a diffusion of identity, and a loss of agency for adolescents in pressure-filled social settings (Schachter & Galliher, 2018; Steinberg, 2010). In this view, the act of resistance to conformity is not only a mode of rebellion (or even just a resistance against conformity), but an existential activity — one in which the young are reappropriating authorship over their values, responsibilities and future selves.

Stress and its Consequences in Youth: Stress as an Existential Signal of Inauthenticity

For youth, stress, the existential mark of inauthenticity (Kaur, 2025; Stolorow, 2007). Stress has become a ubiquitous aspect of youth experience. Whether it is the stresses of school and the pressure of social media, or the pressure of the expectations of family, or, struggling to get to know where they would like to place themselves in the future, a lot of young people state that in each life domain, there are new needs for justification and for performance. This constant demand for performance can be understood in Heideggerian terms as the pressure of the they-self (das Man), where expectations are no longer owned personally, but are dictated by what "one does," "one achieves," or "one must become," thus obscuring the individual's authentic possibilities. Additionally, studies reveal a high correlation between academic pressure and mental health issues such anxiety, depression, and suicide thoughts in teenagers (Steare et al., 2023). While social media can help people to build relationships, these sites can also generate strain due to endless comparison, ideal lifestyles depicted and cyberbullying (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Family expectations that do not align with individuals' own goals may fuel prolonged stress and identity negotiations (Gao, 2023).

Such dynamics are well known to young people. Some, for example, talk of exhaustion from trying to keep up with pictures on Instagram or TikTok that pretend everyone else is happier and more successful. Other times, they talk about the contradictory expectations of families on one hand and desires for themselves, on the other, not just in either world at home but somewhere else, too. These accounts show that, in the friction and alienation, there are real desires you can express as a feeling, not a thought. These living tensions show that stress is not only psychological strain but also ontological disturbance, which happens when Dasein is absorbed in the they-self and becomes alienated from its own most possibilities. Stress and anxiety is not only seen as a mental illness, in fact there is much more to the story. Stress can be, at least in some cases, an affective sign that the way in which you live are once again not fully experienced as internally consistent. Philosophers such as Heidegger thought about this inauthenticity, which is the state where existence is disconnected from the real life self and anxiety starts to grow (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020).

Though the psychological reaction to overload and pressure (or in some instances stress – with a social dimension) has been largely considered the motivator of this phenomenon, there is mounting evidence that it is intricately connected to existential angst about identity and self-authorship. A meta-analysis shows that academic pressure, social comparison and anxiety and depressive symptoms are strongly associated with mental health difficulties in adolescents (Steare et al., 2023; Twenge et al, 2018). So stress is not just a sign of dysregulation but of a need for existential re-orientation. This re-orientation is a retrieval of Dasein from the dispersion of the they-self, where meaning

is no longer externally dictated but reclaimed as one's own project of being.

Not all stressors are visible at the first sight with the obvious reasons — tests, deadlines, feeling disconnected from ourselves — that are easily noticed. There is a certain sort of inner stress that sets it off above and beyond normal levels of stress or the anxiety that most students experience about their programs and grades. The pressure to meet expectations, or fit in, conform to all the latest fashions, meet what family, school or society expects. This sense of despair increases, as does the sense of losing a sense of who one is. Life begins to feel more like an external performance, not one's odyssey. This inauthenticity, that a philosopher who investigated existence, Martin Heidegger, called a condition of living by external criteria rather than one's own. Heidegger calls this mode of being the they-self, in which individuals relinquish their potentialities and act merely because it is socially acceptable at the time. This existential disconnection has been historically identified as a major source of stress and uncertainty among young people who are trying to develop their identities in an age of increasingly interconnected lives (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020).

Existential theorists have long remarked that psychological distress often arises when people live largely in reaction to external expectations, roles or norms rather than what they themselves may have in fact been able to enact. This is what Heidegger calls the "they-self that prevails" and in which one's life becomes arranged around uniformity and habitual responsiveness. Philosophical and clinical research also points to an ongoing relationship between such modes of existence and anxiety, identity diffusion, and lack of agency (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020). Seen through such a lens, stress signifies more than situational overload, but also a distancing from one's own potentiality-for-Being.

Not just doing their own stuff, getting things done or not just getting things done. This is one of the worst stressors for young people today. It's working under a stage where the spotlight never sets, especially in the age of social media and the pressure from schools to family for everything. You may have this feeling that you are in a play and tense by every gesture of the other people. In this way, the social world becomes a they-world, a domain of anonymous norms, in which Dasein is led to conform, often at the expense of authentic self-understanding. Fatigue is easy. Nobody is doing this in isolation. Research demonstrates that pressures to perform and to compare can be harmful to mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and identity confusion (Steinberg, 2010; Twenge et al., 2018). Heidegger called this experience, "fallenness." It means being entangled with routines, roles and expectations that don't come from one's own decisions but from what else society demands.

Sheets-Johnstone (2020) describes fallenness as a mode of life in which men and women are caught by common issues of concern and are consequently deprived of the opportunity for self-actualization on a profound level. The more that young people try to integrate those external voices, however, the more likely they are to feel disconnected, alienated or even rendered paralyzed, which leads to psychological distress as they struggle to make sense of external demands with their own authentic self. When applied in this ontological way, stress ceases to be the expression of the specific symptoms of one person's being, at least into a much broader picture of existential distress in a broken world.

Stress created by the balance of outward performance and inward honesty is a salient form of upset in modern youth. Findings of empirical studies link enduring performance pressures to emotional exhaustion, identity confusion, and diminished well-being in adolescents (Steare et al., 2023; Steinberg, 2010). And exegetically, this is fallenness—a way of being that has individuals absorbed by the need for something they are not, for something more than what the world sees them doing in themselves, unable to distinguish themselves from things they feel they ought to have as well as an ethical duty not to fulfill (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020).

The experiential quality of endurance, if not dealt with, tends to escalate from situational to a sort of deep estrangement from self and world. Psychological research has shown that prolonged exposure to performance pressure and social judgement correlates with chronic

anxiety, depression, withdrawal and motivation failures in adolescents (Steare et al., 2023; Twenge et al., 2018). Existentially, these consequences are symptomatic not only of psychological exhaustion on the part of the adolescent but also of a breakdown in self-connectivity: young people feel themselves to be living someone else's life that is ordered more by something else than an experience they own (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020). Stress thus anticipates alienation, a foreshadowing of a fracturing of being-in-the-world that requires existential (rather than symptom-modifying) resetting. Such resetting involves a disengagement from the interpretive dominance of the they-self and a resituation of oneself as a being capable of owning its thrown condition and projecting its own possibilities.

Alienation (or Disconnectedness): Unhomelikeness and the Fracture of Being-in-the-World

Alienation is treated here as an ontological condition rather than a social deficit. In this paper the words estrangement, alienation and unhomelikeness are used in a similar but not identical sense. Estrangement or alienation broadly refers to the lived experience of disconnection—from others, from social contexts, or from oneself—as commonly described in sociological and psychological literature. Unhomelikeness, following Heidegger, indicates a deeper ontological situation in which the world itself is no longer felt to be intelligible or "one's own," a more basic rupture in being-in-the-world. These terms may overlap in experience but unhomelikeness is understood here as the underlying existential ground from which more recognizable forms of alienation or estrangement emerge. Based on Heidegger's idea of unhomelikeness, the literature provides understanding of how estrangement among young people is experienced not only from others but also from themselves and from the world as a place of meaning. This section synthesizes philosophical and empirical work to show alienation as a form of disaffection through fragmented belonging in contemporary social fragmentation. Sometimes youth can be lived as a slow drift, not knowing where you belong.

Young people are more and more feeling an unfulfilled sense of belonging in their school, community or digital space that they are always in the picture but invisible. That's what many writers and researchers call alienation or disconnectedness. This disconnection is more than feeling lonely or misunderstood, it is that the world no longer feels like home (Rayce et al., 2018). This condition is characterized by a sense of presence without belonging, often referred to as experiential estrangement. This estrangement is understood as the outcome of a long immersion in the they-self, where Dasein no longer recognizes itself in the world in which it lives. It's not just being by myself, but that feeling that something's off. Philosopher Martin Heidegger (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020) offers a way to understand that feeling, which he describes as a mood of unhomelikeness (or estrangement), in which the world we have come to know becomes alien and one is exposed to oneself in a somewhat different context, often a dislocation.

The dislocation of youth alienation has a social dimension that is more than social isolation and reaches out to its more expansive fracturing through the experience of belonging and significance. Classical sociological literature describes alienation as a state of estrangement from oneself, others and the surrounding social world (Wiersma, 2025). Existential phenomenology complicates this view in that within existentialist and phenomenological frameworks of alienation as unhomelikeness – the unsettlingness of the known world – as the experience of becoming a condition with no self, in that we no longer feel "normal" to other people, and also, thus, feel isolated from our self, making us confront our sense of dislocation (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020). Here alienation appears not only as social disconnection but as an existential condition, in which Dasein is displaced from its own being through the dominance of impersonal norms. These sorts of experiences become more pervasive in performance-based environments and embedded within technologized environments that support a diffusion of identity formation and withdrawal of emotionality (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020; Stolorow, 2007), as indicated by empirical and psychoanalytic literature.

Recent age pressures for acceleration, visibility, and constant assessment perpetuate youth's experience of existential dislocation. Research focusing on well-being in adolescence has found that high pressure and low space for reflective processes are significantly related to increased levels of anxiety, depersonalization, and meaninglessness (Twenge et al., 2018; Steare et al., 2023). Existentially, such alienation is evidence of a loss of being-in-the-world, a disjunction between relationships, practices, goals and being — where people no longer feel supported, and without ownership of any personal aspect of their lives (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020). Far from reflecting personal deficiency, they reflect broader holes in modern living arrangements.

At first, alienation usually appears as diffuse symptoms of emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and general feeling of emptiness. Psychological and philosophical research has suggested that such early symptoms of alienation denote a growing disparity of self-conceptions to the contours of regular life (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020; Stolorow, 2007). As this feeling of alienation becomes stronger, adolescents might retreat from relationships and activities that have previously felt significant by finding their lives empty or imposed upon them by others (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020). The world could appear empty, or disorganized or unreal, as though actions performed in a life that no longer feels the young person's own exist outside their heads. These phenomena are the ontological manifestations of ruptured sense from which belonging and meaning, the lifeblood of being-in-the-world, is born (Sheets-Johnstone, 2020).

Paths Toward Existential Liberation: Retrieval of Authenticity and Existential Agency

It's not an optimism or a running from problems that liberates from existentialism, it's an increased awareness of one's own lived experience and agency. It starts with recognizing one's own choices, the power to choose where you want your life to go, that you don't have to do what others want you to do. The philosopher Martin Heidegger called this what it is "resoluteness" — the willingness to face life head on, even when it's hard, to act in service of one's own truth rather than simply going with the flow. In Heideggerian terms, this is a move away from the they-self to an owned mode of existence in which Dasein assumes responsibility for its being.

In more literal terms, it is about the daring to insist on your own narrative, because the narrative itself may be messy and one's own version of the story uncertain. As Wrathall (2014) writes, for Heidegger, authenticity isn't about moral goodness; it's a mode of being in the world: we are true in that we are not hiding behind routines and norms but doing things we know to be true to who we are. This indicates that existential liberation does not demand to be certain or perfect, but rather unfolds through gradual, value-oriented choices. Small choices to begin shutting out what feels wrong and gather energy from the right instead of simply continuing to keep putting one foot in front of the other pulls one further in the direction to living as one intends to, on one's own terms.

Suddick et al. (2021) further this realization by conceptualizing thrownness (the state of being born into a world we did not choose), dwelling (finding meaning in daily life), and authenticity as means to use personal struggle as a means to generate meaningfulness. Russo Netzer & Shoshani (2020) also maintain that true authenticity grows when we no longer filter our lives based on anyone else's thoughts and we start living based on our experience. This section considers the ways in which such liberation happens during intentionality to reflect (self), creativity (how one can make something of oneself), and courageous activism.

Existential liberation is not to do with certainty, not certainty or closure, but rather with gradual accountability to one's own existence as an existential project rather than final conclusion; with the assumption of being in charge of one's own existence, for the first instance. This is what Heidegger would call resoluteness in dialectic—the urge to be resolute, however, which is to state that one makes a stand as such and to act on one's situation, acting on one's reality objectively as self-owned choices rather than passively accepting the accepted norms. The current existential scholarship suggests

that that authenticity of this form is born of the process whereby identity is not naturalized in a sense of automatic action, but through reflection, strategic choice, and continuous discourse with what is lived (Russo-Netzer & Shoshani, 2020; Suddick et al., 2021). Liberation is a change of not simply distance, but the relation to struggle.

Evidence suggests that meaning-oriented reflection and intentional choice are fundamental to adolescent well-being. Research shows adolescents who reflect and question purpose, value, and direction experience more psychological resilience and life satisfaction, even within stressful conditions (De Lise et al., 2024; Krok, 2017). These results correspond with existential accounts that conceptualize development as the becoming grounded, as opposed to adopting the non-critical, externalized pattern (Binder, 2022). Meaning, therefore, is not found, but played out in an everyday act of choosing.

One does not need to know everything or do anything extreme or dramatic to live meaningfully. Often, it is in that small, everyday choice — to say no to something that does not seem right, to choose what makes you feel alive or to ask a courageous question — that is where one's life begins to change. Krok (2017) demonstrated that youths who pay attention to meaning and make intentional choices, including being trapped in a degrading game of chess, report greater levels of satisfaction and well-being. De Lise et al. (2024) point out that authenticity — in the trade defined as being one's authentic self or acting in ways consistent with one's valued process or practices — is one of the top predictors of emotional well-being. A little bit of this sort of authentic perspective comes from everyday decisions and relationships. That is challenging oneself to do something new — perhaps putting things in perspective where one has never felt comfortable, whether that means speaking out for a belief. These, Binder (2022) argues, are strong admonitions for such mundane choices to be considered existential choices in and of themselves; they shape who one is and reveal the person one is about to turn into.

Finding ways to engage others, expressing yourself creatively and limiting participation are simple steps that contribute to improving well-being but also help young people understand and navigate the obstacles of life. De Lise et al. (2024) investigates the potential for youth initiatives in authentic youth in order to show the role that authenticity can play in youth identity formation and emotional resilience. In a digital age over-saturated with shiny filters and fake news, teens of today are seeking realness. Real role models and realistic choices can empower them and help them feel less fearful (Senekal et al., 2023).

The road to clarity and purpose is not a straight line. It is messy, it is slow, it is a constant re-boot. There may be times when you feel confident and clear and other times when you hesitate and doubt. Shumaker (2017) confirms that adulthood and purpose are almost never linear in nature. It comes in waves — moments of confusion, reflection and clarity based on relationships and how people are going through stuff. The thing is that one carries on, one keeps asking questions, one keeps finding ways to live authentically. In a Heideggerian vein, Sheets-Johnstone (2020) states that this path of growing is through being in the world and therefore, it is how youth grow through living and not abstract thinking that truly contributes to growth.

The development of youth identity in existential life is not progressive, nor does it develop in linear fashion or with definitive end-game resolutions but involves the repeated confrontation with doubt, choice, and self-reflection. Based on developmental and existential thought, the two have often agreed to emphasize that authenticity is cultivated in the process of engaging with people's lived experiences, rather than achieved as a stable endpoint (Binder, 2022; Wrathall, 2014). This process can be understood as a continual retrieval of Dasein from fallenness, where authenticity is not a permanent state but a possibility that recurs. The process of identity discovery in adolescence has been described as one in which adolescents use the experimentation with commitments, revision of values, and toleration of ambiguity in relational and social contexts as they move toward adulthood (Branje et al., 2021; Lundvall et al., 2022). The becoming oneself is thus not a one-off breakthrough, but a

sustained engagement with a way of life, which becomes evident in the decisions taken on a day to day basis to express oneself more truly, to live more truthfully in an imperfect and fragmented world.

It does not begin with certainty — it begins with knowing the truth that counts, with owning up to what is real and important, with asking the right questions, and with a willingness and courage to be oneself, no matter how much one's world can get maddening, how much the world can feel distant. This kind of authenticity, that of devotion towards one's authentic truth as Russo-Netzer & Shoshani (2020) define, is where the authentic life begins with self-knowledge, and courage to pursue actions consistent with one's values. De Lise et al. (2024) write, authenticity is not inherent in one, but forged by self-reflection, autonomy and by the support of others during times of extreme uncertainty. Existential courage refers to doing things risk-taking, to putting oneself at times into emotional and social discomfort, in the service of change, of meaning-making, in lieu of upholding stability or a system (Kramer 2024).

Authenticity and agency are things that happen in everyday choices and not big changes. Philosophical analyses point out that even small actions—drawing lines, expressing values or refuting pretence of non-authentic person in roles—contribute to the construction of the self (Binder, 2022; Suddick et al., 2021). More empirical research indicates that adolescents who frame their actions and decisions by their own personally important values show elevated emotional coherence and greater well-being (Krok, 2017). From this existential liberation is better conceived as a process of life, rather than as a certain set point in time: an on-going process of choosing oneself in a fragmentary world.

The diagram is an image that conveys the main message of the review. The figure depicts a conceptual flow in which stress and alienation are not isolated outcomes, but rather as interconnected existential conditions that arise from immersion in externally imposed demands. These circumstances slowly intensify the young person's sense of alienation, and eventually bring about a key turning point in the direction of reflection and self-awareness. This point of change, defined as a reflective turn towards meaning, begins a movement towards existential liberation, not as linear escape but as a slow retrieval of authenticity through meaning-centered involvement, self-articulation and agency in a fragmented world. This represents the diagram as an interconnected movement of conditions and transitions that frame youth experience in a fragmented world. And this image recalls the adolescent's battle with anxiety and isolation, but also a feeling of being on the cusp of something new and hopeful. This trajectory is a departure from stress and alienation towards a transformative threshold where individuals begin to reclaim authorship of their lives. The process of existential liberation is seen (please see Figure 1 for details). This figure is not to be seen as a static progression through stages of development, but as a dynamic and recursive flow. Individuals can move back and forth between stages, negotiating the tensions of a fragmented social world, returning to earlier conditions as part of an ongoing existential process.

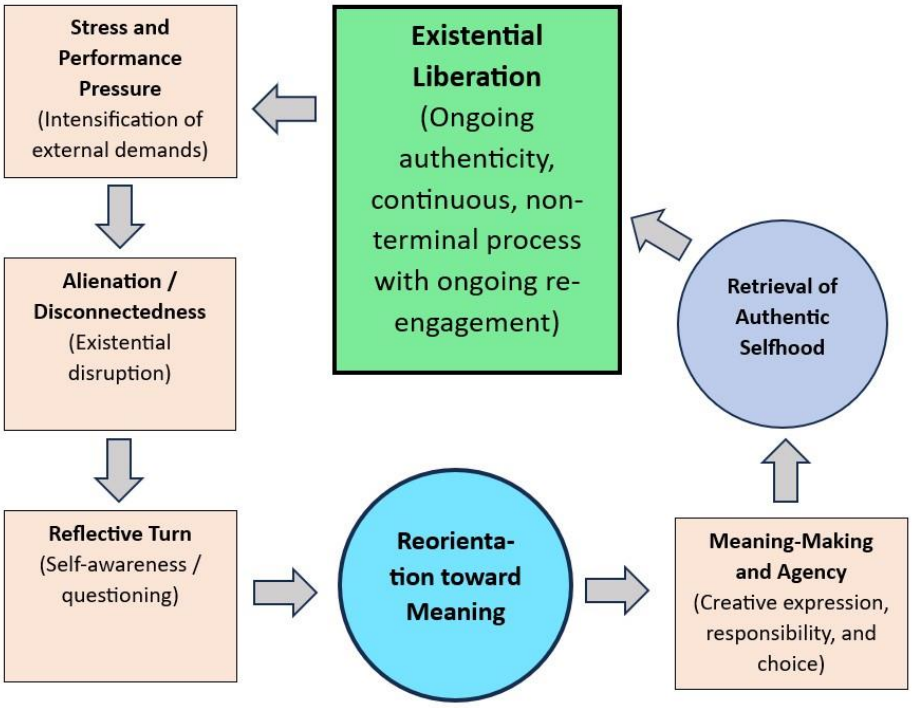

Figure 1. Conceptual progression from stress and alienation toward existential liberation through reflective and meaning-oriented processes

Source: Author's conceptualization based on the reviewed literature.

Note. Rectangles indicate experiential conditions, while circles represent transformative transitions. Arrows illustrate the movement of existential experience from stress and alienation toward reflective reorientation and existential liberation. The figure should be understood as dynamic and recursive, with possible return to earlier conditions.

Conclusion

The current view considered here is that youth distress, despite the contemporary age of fragmentation, performance pressure, and the absence of a present (and secure) source of meaning, is not simply evidence of life's inability to manage trauma, but a transparent, if not aggressive, meditation on deeper existential tensions. And it is in the reading of experiences of stress and alienation that young people must navigate socially prescribed scripts and struggle about how to know themselves living within them authentically — the reading of their experiences as lived ontologically. This time not as a 'problem to be solved,' nor 'a stage to be overcome', but as a lifelong activity of becoming, a process in which selfhood, agency, and meaning are always open and redefined.

But critically, this analysis does not perceive stress and alienation as conditions that should be crushed or transcended once and for all. Rather, they are a landscape where problems of authenticity, responsibility, and self-connection appear, often unresolved. Indeed, there is something to be said for existential liberation in this sense — that it is not about resolution or arrival, but about a state that is also more conscious, receptive and sensitive to living in the uncomfortable, the liminal, and the dislocated, in uncertainty and restriction.

Besides providing a new perspective on youth distress this existential lens has important implications for practice. Stress and alienation may no longer be seen as problems to be reduced, but as meaningful signals of deeper struggles with identity, agency and authenticity for educators, counsellors and practitioners. This perspective calls for a shift from purely performance or corrective interventions to spaces that enable reflection, dialogue and self-articulation. In educational settings this might mean creating spaces that value questioning, creativity and meaning-making, as well as achievement. In counselling and youth support,

this means attending not only to symptoms of distress but to the young person's sense of authorship of their life. Practitioners are thus invited to guide youth not toward predetermined outcomes, but rather to help them navigate ambiguity, wrestle with existential tensions, and gradually develop lives that feel authentically their own. So, practice is not only a way to ease suffering, but also a way to participate in the young person's ongoing process of becoming.

For offering an existential-interpretive rereading of youth distress, this review offers a conceptual lens that supplements empirical work while also resisting the problem-solving and pathologizing framings that are so often advocated. It invites scholars, educators, and practitioners to read youth distress in the way that may inform something they teach themselves not as a message of abandonment, but as an opening for continuing to ask what is worth living, and for that to mean also feeling and of acting upon and coming into an unsettled world.

Acknowledgement

This is an article aimed at the young, who are already struggling to fathom the shattered world they have grown up in, trying to find some sort of understanding, and desire guidance and wisdom how to live. And the narratives in this work do not merely reflect the young's fears and sorrows, but also the strength, skills and ingenuity they display in doing so. This work not only honors the suffering and questions of young people but also reassures that young people can move toward ways of existential freedom.

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