

Existential Social Work

and the Psychological Situation
of Young Adults in Europe

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About the Speaker

Johannes Nathschläger (*1980)

- Diploma in Social Work, Berlin (2004)
- Dr. phil. in Philosophy, Munich (2013)
- 12+ years as a social worker in child & youth welfare, addiction services, and support for unaccompanied minors
- Since 2016: Professor for Social Work at katho NRW, Münster

Research focus: Existential Social Work, Theories of Social Work, Open Child & Youth Work

Overview



I

Empirical Data

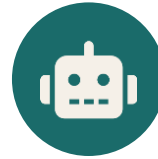
What do we know about the psychological situation of young adults?



II

Existential Social Work

A theoretical framework for addressing meaning and orientation



III

Double Meaning-Threat

How AI and social change threaten traditional sources of meaning



IV

Discussion

Cross-cultural perspectives: Germany, Hungary, and beyond

PART I

The Psychological Situation of Young Adults in Europe

What does the empirical evidence tell us?

A Historic Reversal: Young Adults Now Most Unhappy

Blanchflower & Bryson (2025)

- Data from 21 European countries, 15+ million observations (1973–2024)
- Life satisfaction used to follow a U-curve with lowest point around age 50
- **This pattern has now reversed — young adults (18–24) report the lowest satisfaction**
- Decline most pronounced in Northern/Central Europe, UK, USA, Canada

**Youth
Crisis**

replaces

**Midlife
Crisis**

From Unhappiness to a Crisis of Meaning

Shell Youth Study 2024 · SINUS Study 2024 · COPSY Study 2020–2024

What's driving the crisis?

- Social media: constant comparison, FOMO, cyberbullying
- Future anxiety: 72% worry about war, 62% about the economy, 57% about climate
- **21% report regular loneliness**
- Rising cost of living, delayed financial independence
- Depression risk tripled by future-related worries

The emerging 'Meaning Gap'

- Young people explicitly name 'searching for meaning' as a key concern
- A gap opens between the question 'What am I living for?' and available answers
- Many experience the future as uncontrollable — a loss of direction and stability
- **Dominant feeling: collective disorientation in a generation under permanent crisis**

PART II

Existential Social Work

A framework for addressing existential questions in professional practice

What Is Existential Social Work?

Social work is not only about material needs (housing, employment, welfare) and social justice.

In practice, professionals are also confronted — often incidentally — with existential questions: meaninglessness, freedom, suffering, guilt, loneliness, and the finitude of life.

Existential Social Work draws on existentialist philosophy (Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, Jaspers) and existential psychotherapy (Viktor Frankl, Irvin Yalom) to equip social workers for these encounters.

Two existential questions
(following Odo Marquard)

HOW
do I survive?

(material existence)

WHY
should I survive?

(meaning & purpose)

Frankl's 'Existential Vacuum' and Methods



Unlike an animal, no instinct tells man what he must do, and unlike man in former times, no tradition tells him what he should do. Now he seems not to know what he actually wants.

— Viktor E. Frankl (1905–1997)

Frankl's three sources of meaning:

Creative Values

Meaning through work, care, art, creation

Experiential Values

Meaning through love, beauty, nature, encounters

Attitudinal Values

Meaning through taking a stance toward unavoidable suffering

PART III

The Double Meaning-Threat

AI, technological disruption, and the erosion of meaning

Two Sources of Meaning Under Pressure

Threat to Creative Values

- AI disrupts career paths and entry-level jobs across sectors
- 39% of core work skills will change by 2030 (WEF 2025)
- Even creative and artistic work is increasingly automated
- **Identity and self-worth can no longer be anchored to professional roles alone**

Threat to Experiential Values

- Growing loneliness: many young people lack close friendships
- Digital media replace real encounters and weaken social bonds
- Performance pressure and fragmented daily life hinder genuine community experiences
- **Amplified by a likely sharp increase in life expectancy — more years to fill with meaning**

Implications: Toward a 'Pedagogy of Meaning'

Social work that accompanies young people into the future must first understand how radically the world is changing.

What seems needed is a form of 'meaning-oriented pedagogy' (Sinnpädagogik) that supplements established pedagogical approaches — creating spaces where existential questions are not avoided but consciously addressed.

Methods from Existential Social Work that may serve this goal:



**Socratic
Dialogue**



**Logotherapy
(Frankl)**



**Biographical
Work**



Bibliotherapy

DISCUSSION

Meaning and Orientation as a Core Task for Social Work?



1

Do you observe similar patterns of disorientation and meaning-crisis among young people in Hungary? How do they compare to the situation in Germany or other European countries?

2

In your experience or field of study: who is currently 'responsible' for supporting young people with existential questions — schools, social workers, therapists, religious institutions, or no one?

3

How well do we need to understand the technological future in order to accompany young people into it? Is this a task for social work at all?

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