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Received: 14 February 2023 | Revised: 28 October 2023 | Accepted: 5 February 2024

DOI: 10.1111/jtsb.12416

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

A sociology of existence for a late modern world. Basic assumptions and conceptual tools

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Abstract

In the present article, we outline basic assumptions and conceptual tools for a sociology of existence. First, we address man's fundamental conditions of existence: that life's finitude and encounters with the uncertainty of existence are fundamental experiences that construct social relations. Second, we outline how existential meaning-making and the ability to cope with the unpredictability of life are dependent on power resources, where especially the resource poor may experience 'existential nausea'. Third, we discuss how existential dilemmas may intensify under certain historical eras. Therefore, studying individuals' existential dilemmas is a tool to examine the dominant social issues at a particular time and place. Fourth, we elaborate on the importance of studying turning points during individuals' life courses, as existential meaning – or lack thereof – becomes particularly salient at these times. This includes an understanding that death and rebirth are experienced in the form of various endings and beginnings in everyday life. Fifth, and finally, we emphasize an analysis in which the direction of people's lives is conceptualized in a broad time perspective, where past, present, and future interact and influence life choices and social relations constructed during a lifetime.

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KEYWORDS
existential imperative, existential nausea, existential philosophy, life space, sociology of existence, trust capital

Milan Kundera (1988, pp. 6–7, italics in original) writes that the insight of the art of the novel is 'to have as one's only certainty the *wisdom of uncertainty*'. Through exploration of the ambiguity of the world of life (*die Lebenswelt*), and thus 'to scrutinize man's concrete life and protect it against "the forgetting of being"' (1988, p. 5; cf. Heidegger, 1996), the novelist examines *existence* understood as 'the realm of human possibilities' (1988, p. 42). In much of the traditional sociological research, by contrast, exploration of the uncertainty of the social world has not been the dominant starting point. Instead, sociology has tended to aspire to be the crown of modern social science by developing theories of social laws and order (cf. Douglas, 2010b; Fontana, 1984; Manning, 1973). Furthermore, existential themes, such as anxiety, freedom, and life meaning, have been largely unarticulated, which has been interpreted as indicating that questions of faith and the uncertainty of existence are not really considered part of the project of modern science (Alexander, 2006; cf. Douglas, 2010b). As Peter L. Berger (1969, p. 93) once wrote, 'modern society has generated philosophical positions that deny the meaningfulness of "existential inquiries" by relegating them to meaninglessness'. Concerning the social and human sciences overall, Huon Wardle et al. (2023, p. 1) likewise stress the status of existential human science as a 'peripheral theoretical frame'.

Exploration of existential facets of the human experience has, thus, often been neglected or sidestepped. At the same time, and something to which we will return, 'the history of sociological thought', Joseph Kotarba and Andrii Melnikov (2023, p. 13) say, 'is consonant with many existentialist themes'. For instance, there is the American school of existential sociology (which was particularly productive in the 1970s-1980s), 'existence theory' as a new theory of social behaviour (see Baert et al., 2022), and 'late modern' sociologists who have addressed how existential uncertainty has intensified in contemporary societies. Among others, Anthony Giddens (1991), Ulrich Beck (1992), and Eva Illouz (2021) stress that one main sociological question in late modernity concerns how people address an all-encompassing uncertainty.

Although sociologists throughout history have dealt with existential themes, they have rarely analysed these within a sociological framework of existence. Consequently, we address this neglect here by outlining basic assumptions and present conceptual tools for such a *sociology of existence*. In doing so, we start from man's fundamental condition, as the only finite being, of having knowledge and experiences of one's own finitude, and how this impacts both the collective history of humanity and the life history of the individual. In a concrete way, we contribute a perspective that allows us to analyse how individuals' search for meaning, or their experiences of meaninglessness, is connected to this condition and how their (in)abilities to cope with the unpredictability, which follows from this, is based on the disparate resources ('capital') at their disposal.

In the first part of the article, we start from existential philosophy[1] and outline how fundamental conditions of existence are productive for sociological theory. Second, we discuss how existential meaning-making and the ability to cope with the unpredictability of life depend on access to power and different forms of capital. Third, we discuss how perspectives are needed that specifically illuminate issues of existential uncertainty and meaning in late modernity.

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Fourth, we emphasize the value of examining turning points and transitions in life, as well as how death and rebirth are constantly experienced in everyday life. Fifth, we present concepts concerning how to analyse the direction of people's life trajectories in a broad temporal perspective, where the present always interacts with the past and the future. Finally, we conclude with the main contributions of our sociology of existence in relation to both existential sociology and sociology overall.

1 | EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE FUNDAMENTAL CONDITIONS OF EXISTENCE

Our approach has been constructed in dialogues between empirical puzzles and ongoing conceptual development (cf. Bourdieu, 1995; Fontana & Van de Water, 1977). Several of our research studies, in the sociologies of family and work, have led us to conclude that the current conceptual tools within the respective research fields are sometimes insufficient to encompass the sociological problems the cases presented to us. In other words, 'normal science' (cf. Kuhn, 1962) has tended to leave out key aspects needed for understanding 'as many as possible of the complex facets of the human experience' (Fontana, 1984, p. 4). As an illustration, in a longitudinal qualitative interview study of work-family conflict in the professional artistic field, Flisbäck (2014) underlines that it is not only the phenomenon of becoming a parent and caring for a child that affects professional identity, work ability, and a belief in future possibilities. The study also made visible how the loss of a close relative affects both family life and the artistic career. The practical and guiding support – the *trust capital* – provided by a grandparent disappeared when the grandparent died.

Accordingly, family formation processes are not separated from thoughts of life's fragility, its beginning and finitude with concerns about, or concrete experiences of, the passing of a loved one. As Judith Butler (2004) says, in the moment of loss, people become aware of their social dependence on others, i.e., a basic sociality that is so often repressed when people are unwilling to acknowledge that they are part of a social or ecological universe or are mortal beings (cf. Bauman, 1992; Elias, 1985). Such insights seem to emerge even in the experiences of uncertainty, solitude, and vulnerability when people become parents.

A similar heightened awareness of the presence of death as a fundamental condition of existence – *being-toward-death* according to Martin Heidegger (1996) – also emerged in a qualitative, longitudinal interview study of the retirement process. A palpable sense that time was running out and was, thus, precious was revealed in several interviews when the interviewees were saying goodbye to a long professional life (cf. Bengtsson et al., 2017; Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2017, 2021). The study finds that a one-sided policy focus on financial incentives to encourage older workers to delay retirement misses important dimensions of what will provide value and meaning for many individuals in a later phase of life. Given the heightened awareness among older workers that life does not last forever, the existential meaning dimensions of work effort – that work has a higher purpose, such as passing on life and work experiences to a new generation – may grow in importance compared to the instrumental rewards of work.

A basis for the sociology of existence approach presented here is that we cannot fully understand individuals' lived experiences if we do not relate these to the ultimate, existential condition of man's finitude and the fact that social life consists of parallel processes of 'births' and 'deaths' (cf. Arendt, 1998). According to Heidegger (1996), these fundamental conditions of

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existence become particularly salient when the routines of everyday life are broken, which can happen when an everyday thing – a tool or a machine – breaks. Because Heidegger stresses that existence consists of practice in relation to useful things – what is 'at hand', the 'context of reference' (p. 70), becomes discernible when things become unusable. In other words, 'in a *disruption of reference* – in being unusable for… – the reference becomes explicit' (p. 70, italics in original). As an illustration, when the hammer breaks, the chain leading from the stroke to livelihood is made clear to the craftsman. What happens is that the 'unusable' is taken out of its practical time context and thus becomes possible to reflect upon and theorize about (pp. 64–65).

The 'breach' (p. 70) with the familiar thus gives rise to an understanding of the fundamental condition that man is all the possibilities of an unwritten future, including the most fundamental one: that he can die at any time. However, the fact that life is a being-toward-death is something that people, both as individuals and as social beings, would rather not think about. Instead, and ideally, we would like to believe that we are 'masters' of our own existence (cf. Elias, 1985). For this reason, Heidegger (1996) stresses that death is often abstracted into a statistical probability that does not touch our own lives or that is explained by a diagnosis, where a person dies for specific reasons. However, existence as a being-toward-death is experienced as events ending and practices ceasing, such as the last days of summer before the autumn darkness spreads, or when flowers wilt and decay. In addition, there may be more dramatic breaks, such as the loss of a loved one, the dissolution of love or friendships, or the end of the collective meaning of work when people are told that they have been made redundant from their jobs. However, the experience of being-toward-death may also concern ageing and when parts of our lives are lost forever, as expressed by Patrick Modiano (2022, p. 10, our translation): '[T]he different stages of life – childhood, youth, middle age, old age – correspond to the same number of sequential deaths'. To sum up, being-toward-death is the fundamental condition that intertwines with all the different areas of social life.

Following this, man is a meaning-seeking being, 'condemned' to reflect on life and death – at least when this reflection is not depreciated but awakened in the ruptures of everyday life. Consequently, we need a sociology that takes seriously the existential questions people ask themselves in similar situations, as formulated by Berger (1969, p. 93): '"What is the purpose of my life?" "Why must I die?" "Where do I come from and where will I go?" "Who am I?"' (cf. Johnson & Kotarba, 2002, p. 4). For some individuals, such questions may be answered by taking a clear direction in life; for others, life appears to be numbed or bottomless, with a sense of losing one's footing.

Following that life is a journey towards one's finitude, life is, at its core, *unpredictable*. For Hannah Arendt, human unpredictability is, paradoxically, the only constant in a fragile life context. Besides the understanding of existence as a being-toward-death, Arendt (1998) adds the distinguishing feature of the phenomenon of birth, *natality*, as the other fundamental condition of human existence (cf. Gaffney, 2018). This is the ontological root of the human capacity for 'action', and thus the possibility to start anew (which Arendt metaphorically refers to as *a second birth*), that constitutes human freedom and the openness and incalculability of existence.

Animals, Arendt (1998, pp. 18–19) says, 'exist only as members of a species whose immortal life is guaranteed through procreation'. On the contrary, man's life task – or way of dealing with his mortality – is to actively intervene. In our understanding, this is the definition of man's existential meaning-making – the process that gives life meaning and creates a direction in an ever-present uncertainty, and in which man connects with others and lays the foundation for his social being. In her critical appropriation of Heidegger's notion of care in the mode of authenticity[2], Arendt finds existential meaning in her understanding of *caritas* as an authentic

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way to 'indwell the world as love': '*caritas* is always concerned with something larger and more enduring than itself, directed/.../towards the preservation of a world that can outlast our particular lives in it' (Gaffney, 2018, pp. 151, 153, italics in original). Also, Zygmunt Bauman (1992), following this line of thought, has said that our mortality, and its associated fears, drives us to build a society, i.e., to give shape to something that can endure and be passed on to future generations. In other words, to cope with the uncertainty of existence, its disruptions and losses, people search for trusting relationships and try to shape existential meaning in various social practices.

Concepts such as being-toward-death and a second birth are examples of how existential philosophy can enable new insights into these phenomena in established research fields (cf. Fontana, 1980). However, as sociologists, we need to go beyond the existentialist view of man's becoming and anticipation of one's death by adding the sociological premise that man's opportunities and constraints are formed by *social relations*. We could accomplish this by offering refined concepts for empirical analyses of *how* – and *under what concrete circumstances* – existential meaning is, or is prevented from being, evoked, constructed or re-constructed. The main point of the sociology of existence approach presented here is thus to broaden not only the scope of sociological thought by extending the empirical study of existential *themes* (such as human beings' orientations towards life and death, anxiety, suicide, alienation), but also the development of a sociology of existence *perspective* to develop new sociological concepts, and to reinterpret sociological theory and research findings.

2 | EXISTENTIAL NAUSEA AND CAPITAL FOR COPING WITH THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF LIFE

Following the writings of American existential sociologists, one sociological 'mistake' is the premise of an *ordered* social reality. According to Jack D. Douglas (2010b, p. 14), man 'is varied, changeable, uncertain, conflictful, and partially free to choose what he will do and what he will become, because he must be so to exist in a world that is varied, changeable, uncertain, and conflictful'. However, while participants of this American school of thought emphasize the fact that individuals, regardless of class, gender etc., experience existential dissatisfaction and existential 'yearning' (Douglas, 2010b, p. 64), as *sociologists* it is essential (from our point of view) to analyse *unequal possibilities*, i.e., the unequal distribution of power and resources in society means that some groups must live with greater existential uncertainty than others. In this respect, our perspective is more like the existential anthropology approach developed by Michael D. Jackson. His anthropological starting point is that humans, in their 'struggle for being', are their future possibilities, i.e., 'potential being' (Jackson, 2005, p. x; cf. Jaspers, 1967, pp. 63–66). However, he combines this with Pierre Bourdieu's starting point that capital is unequally distributed – 'life within limits' (cf. Jackson, 2011).

In the 1970s when American existential sociologists saw themselves as offering 'a *new* perspective on our social world' (Douglas, 2010a, p. 291, our italics), feminist sociology, as well, criticized how sociology was dominated by programmatic macro-analyses that obscured the fact that the structure of social life is found in the mundane details of everyday life. According to Dorothy Smith (1974), mainstream sociologists (often men from privileged classes) were frequently more concerned with constructing people as static *objects* than with making visible the processes through which people, as *subjects*, try to live their lives by various means. Here,

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Smith recounted her experience of the expectation that she, as a sociologist, should study 'the social' as something far removed from her own private, everyday life (cf. Berger, 1977).

The fact that people face existence in different ways due to unequally distributed resources, discrimination, etc., was a starting point for Smith. In modern capitalist societies, Smith explains, women and dominated classes are more likely to perform lower valued tasks, such as manual labour or work close to people's sphere of necessity, or care needs. As Bourdieu (1989) wrote some years later, one central driving force of social life is the desire to keep a distance from necessity – a disdain for being dependent on the necessities of life. The distance, or closeness, people may have to the necessities of life, like the freedom they have to choose different options, implies social power, but also that practices are lived and experienced in different ways. For some social groups, existence means being largely for others, a means to other people's ends (cf. Bourdieu, 2001; Jackson, 2005).

From the perspective of the sociology of existence, dominant groups' attempts to keep their distance from necessity (following Bourdieu's understanding) should be linked to a desire to repress their own transience, i.e., the fact that everyone will eventually die – not just those who perform work close to the sphere of necessity. For dominated groups, however, this relationship of domination leads to living one's life according to the needs of other people, an experience that has been described by sociologists and philosophers as symptomatic of resource-poor and discriminated groups (cf. Ahmed, 2007; Fanon, 1967; Jackson, 2005). For instance, Bourdieu (2001, p. 66, italics in original) emphasizes how masculine domination constructs women 'as symbolic objects whose being (*esse*) is a being-perceived (*percipi*)' and, thus, that women do not feel at home either in their own body or in the world they inhabit. Lack of capital is often embodied in the individual's internal orientation – her socially created, but at the same time uniquely shaped, *habitus* – in such a way that *disorientation*, rather than homeliness, becomes the dominant feeling in higher education or in the corridors of power (Bourdieu, 1989).[3] Because of a lack of social 'sameness' in places shaped by – and for – dominant groups, discriminated and resource-poor people, according to Sara Ahmed (2007), find themselves constantly being 'stopped', i.e., a bodily sense of not really belonging to the world in which they live.

As we see it, the effect of the exercise of power and the struggle for scarce resources can form a sense of *existential nausea*. For Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist of Jean-Paul Sartre's literary classic, all things and living creatures appear as foreign, and therefore scarifying. Nausea, as Sartre describes it, entails that existence 'has a certain way of having itself picked up' without us knowing why. Roquentin expresses being *gripped by nausea* by being 'stopped': 'A little while ago, just as I was coming into my room, *I stopped short* because I felt in my hand a cold object which held my attention through a sort of personality' (Sartre, 1969, p. 4, our italics).

Sartre's description of the loss of the familiar is an attempt to use the existential-philosophical literature to reflect a *universally shared*, yet very concretely lived, experience of existence as fluid and absurd – at least when freedom cannot be transformed into a possibility or into a commitment to a cause (cf. Fontana, 1980; Fontana & Van de Water, 1977). However, sociology has a unique potential to analyse how an unequal distribution of resources is embodied in individuals and reflected in existential approaches to the world, in existential meaning-making and in individuals' ability to cope with unpredictability. At the same time, it is important that the sociological analysis is not reduced to the norms or resources of the social environment (cf. Wardle et al., 2023).

Existence always involves hopes for a life beyond the present, whereby we must also strive to capture individuals' attempts to transform the given into something meaningful. We should,

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however, not forget that people, as Roquentin in *Nausea* can lead 'a life with nothing in sight' (Fontana & Van de Water, 1977, p. 105). In other words, one main question is under what social conditions it is possible to shape the given into something meaningful – to examine how the possibility to intervene, and thus the foundation for existential meaning-making, is socially conditioned. Because, as Jackson (2005, pp. xxx-xxxi, footnote 3) says, among the resource poor, agency 'is less a matter of transcendence than endurance/…/a stoic acceptance that one's destiny is in the hands of others, and that withstanding hardship and holding one's tongue is often more important than self-expression'. But as we will see, resources are not only a matter of cultural or material forms of capital, but also of the intimate love and friendship relationships we have at our disposal.

2.1 | Trust capital – a resource for dealing with the uncertainty of existence

Late modernity is characterized by processes such as detraditionalization and increased reflexivity (Giddens, 1991), individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), and social acceleration (Rosa, 2013). Following this, sociology needs concepts that highlight the amplified uncertainty in everyday life and, thus, that capture the existential issues multiplied 'amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities' in a world where 'certainty of knowledge' has been undermined (Giddens, 1991, pp. 3, 21). In this regard, Flisbäck (2006, 2014) has complemented Bourdieu's set of capitals with *trust capital*, i.e., a relational social resource for handling existential uncertainty.[4] The concept is a tool for capturing what Giddens (1991) describes as a heightened need for ontological security in a world of increased 'doubt'. At the same time, trust capital, being grounded in both the experiences of intimate love and friendship relationships, intends to move beyond the more abstract theory for which social theorists like Beck and Giddens have been criticized.[5]

In several influential studies, Illouz (see, e.g., 2012, 2021) states that intimate relationships drive the all-encompassing existential uncertainty of late capitalistic society, because love has taken the form of a capitalist market logic of the best conquest for the least amount of effort. Flisbäck's (2014) point is, on the contrary, that intimate love and friendship relationships are a source of both security and trust in the uncertain existence of the contemporary world and a basis for constructing existential meaning. Here inspiration is drawn from Giddens (1992) concept of *pure relationship*, a fundamental resource of trust in late modern society. Based on a voluntary chosen intimacy, these relationships provide support and concrete tenderness, both emotionally and intellectually. Trust capital, however, is not only exchanged and generated in a love relationship, but can be generated, equally in friendship or in other relationships of trust.

Moreover, while we only stay in pure relationships if they give us something in return, trust capital also considers the responsibilities that people have even in cases where the relationship does not repay. Thus, the main inspiration for developing the concept is the works of theologian Knud E. Løgstrup (2020). Here trust is the link that binds us to others, much like in classical sociological and anthropological perspectives (see, e.g., Durkheim, 1964; Mauss, 2002). According to Løgstrup, trust is a given, regardless of the social and historical context. Man's first impulse is to seek the other with the expectation of being treated respectfully. Trust can thus be seen as a basic social willingness to interact and communicate both with and for others (cf. Rosa, 2013).

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In one person's willingness to reach out to another person, it happens that 'the individual delivers themselves up, goes out of themselves, places something of their life in the hands of the other person' (Løgstrup, 2020, p. 16). However, self-disclosure of trust may be exploited or treated with indifference, leaving us alone in our desire to communicate. All relationships are vulnerable and contain a fundamental aspect of power. Therefore, according to Løgstrup, there arises an unspoken *ethical demand* to show respect and responsibility for the exposure of trust, i.e., to understand what the other needs, and to exchange different perspectives so that the horizons of both are broadened. This requires what Løgstrup calls 'insight, imagination, and understanding' (2020, p. 21).

Like Løgstrup's definition of trust, trust capital can never be generated on its own, but arises in interaction between people. This capital is thus not solely *dependent on* relationships with other people, like cultural capital and economic capital are (cf. Bourdieu, 1989). Rather, like social capital, trust capital is *constituted by* relationships and communities. At the same time, trust capital has a very specific impact on our lives that makes it key to any existential sociological analysis: With the support of others in intimate love and friendship relationships, one's own visions and dreams of the future can be externalized and concretized. Life is, thus, given a direction, and the future is pictured in a concrete way that counteracts the anxiety the unpredictability of life gives rise to (cf. Heidegger, 1996).

3 | INTENSIFICATION OF EXISTENTIAL DILEMMAS FROM MODERNITY TO THE LATE MODERN WORLD

If existence is always uncertain and precarious, as seen above, trust capital can be a resource that is necessary for dealing with this fundamental uncertainty. However, due to its uncertainty, existence always offers opportunities for change – the possibility to act and create existential meaning. This can be done in experiences of resonance (Rosa, 2019), social responsiveness (Løgstrup, 2020), and with an openness to ambiguity (Kundera, 1988). Nevertheless, we have also seen how social relations can be coercive and exploitative, and that existence then becomes more a matter of being for others, which is experienced as existential nausea.

As emphasized earlier, illuminating the unpredictability of life and conceptualizing questions about the meaning of existence are not absent in sociology. If we just decide to shed light on the existential facets of human experience, the question of how existential meaning and meaning loss become aspects of man's life and work could be described as essential in both contemporary and classical sociology. For example, Max Weber analyses man's 'yearning for meaning' as 'existential meaning or meaningfulness' (Segal, 1999, p. 659; cf. Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2020b). By emphasizing ideal-typical aspects of religious-ethical meaning systems, Weber (1965) offers an understanding of how people in their human praxis strive to create coherent overall meaning in life. He particularly used *calling* as a conceptual tool for analysing man's struggle to find and live out ultimate values or meanings in life in a 'disenchanted world' (cf. Weber, 2009a, 2009b). According to Weber, the vital meaning of calling is in danger of being lost with the specialization, efficiency, and rationalization of modern society, where a new type of human being is formed who has difficulty handling existential meaning (cf. Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2020b; Schroeder, 1991). On a similar theme, Karl Marx argues that modern man has been deprived of the pleasure and existential meaning of work as craft. In capitalism, the continuous pursuit of profit commodifies social relations, and with the concept of *alienation*,

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Marx (1906, 2007) offers a tool to analyse these numbed relations along with their subsequent feelings of futility.

From the above, we have learned that existential meaninglessness may be intensified with the growth of modern capitalist systems of production, the expansion of the bureaucratic state, and the widespread diffusion of new technologies (cf. Berger, 1977). In these modern, abstract contexts, there is a greater need for a social science that places existential themes at its centre. Here, Giddens (1991) emphasizes that the number of existential questions has been increased in a late modern world. Because the world has become both closer to us and more distant through technological development, our experiences have escalated. In addition, man's increasing knowledge and reflexivity have exacerbated his fundamental uncertainties and doubts, which together 'forms a general existential dimension of the contemporary social world' (Giddens, 1991, p. 3). In this context, God is long dead and the world less shaped by guiding traditions.

In late modern societies, existential issues are often repressed and 'institutionally excluded' (Giddens, 1991, p. 9), but they have – paradoxically – intensified. On a similar note, Beck (1992) developed the theory of the emergence of *risk society* during *a second modernity*. Here, the optimism of modern progress and the pursuit of welfare capitalism (aiming to deliver both constant high economic growth and greater social equality) have created side effects that have backfired, producing ecological dangers and more recurrent global economic and financial crises. If a major attraction of early modernity, according to Berger (1977, p. 108, italics in original), is found in the liberating principle that '*things could be other than what they have been*', this optimism of progress has, in late modernity, been overwhelmed by a pervasive 'vertigo of relativity' (Berger, 1969, p. 91). As Beck (1992) says, in the risk society, unintended consequences are the only thing we can safely expect. Furthermore, paraphrasing Sartre's expression that people are 'condemned to freedom', Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. 4) argue that individuals are 'condemned to individualization'. Consequently, when the traditions that offered common answers to existential questions are pushed back, people search for new practices to deal with existential dilemmas. According to Giddens (1991), this is primarily a matter of inventing new institutions that provide existential meaning – such institutions can be either democratic or totalitarian in nature.

Furthermore, according to Hartmut Rosa (2013), contemporary society is constituted by a *social acceleration* in which the ever-increasing speed of capitalism and the search for control have, ironically, led to the experience of a 'frenetic standstill'. Conditions change rapidly with the heightening pace of life. However, what people now both seek and need is *resonance*, that is, an existentially meaningful state in which we are touched in a way that changes us, often in an unexpected way, by allowing ourselves to be transformed in social relations or in relation to nature (Rosa, 2019)[6]. Rosa (2020) stresses that resonance can only emerge in the encounter with the world's 'unverfügbarkeit', i.e., in an unexpected and incalculable relationship. In our interpretation, the fact that resonance arises in the openness of social life means that uncertainty has an enabling side. Beck points out that, even in the risk society, we may turn risks into chances. This happens when we live as 'Freedom's Children', i.e., a new generation that develops strategies to take advantage of the opportunities that may arise in relation to economic, ecological, and social risks. These children of late modernity form an everyday *life politics* with alternative ways of living that include both self-development *and* responsibility for future generations (Beck, 1998; cf. Giddens, 1991). This contemporary 'action', as Arendt (1998) would have put it, thus becomes a way of shaping existential meaning and, in the risk society, turning the vast uncertainties of the present into some kind of possibility.

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Based on the above reasoning, we can understand that, in certain historical epochs, the need to search for existential meaning intensifies, and that different social and historical contexts give rise to specific existential questions. Worth emphasizing here is that we need to recognize late modernity as an epoch that cannot be understood sociologically if human existential questions are not addressed within a sociology of existence framework. Just as the literary and philosophical currents of existentialism were particularly heard after the mass death and Holocaust camps of World War II, and the emergence of the 'atomic age', a sociology of existence research agenda can be significant in the contemporary context of increased threats of nuclear war, new pandemics, and an accelerating climate crisis. In this apocalyptic era, we need a sociology capable of dealing with escalating existential dilemmas. Here we also wish to argue that our sociology of existence can be used as a methodological tool. Examining existential issues or conundrums, articulated at a particular time and place in people's narratives or through artistic expression, can thus help us say something significant about macro-level processes and structural conditions.

4 | EXISTENTIAL IMPERATIVE AND THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF THE FUTURE

What we can learn from the perspectives presented above is that, if modernity's attempts to control life's uncertainties have failed, there may be an opportunity in the openness of uncertainty. To capture the openings in life that can enable individuals to initiate new actions and create meaning, Jackson's concept of *existential imperative* is fruitful. The concept is anchored in existential philosophy, and the intellectual heritage of Arendt is crucial. While Arendt writes that action is one of 'the modes in which human beings appear to each other', and this appearance 'rests on/…/an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human' (Arendt, 1998, p. 176), Jackson (Jackson, 2015, p. 174) says that, in everyone's humanity, there is 'an ontologically "primitive" imperative to act' on one's world. If Arendt (1998, p. 178) discusses an 'impulse' or fundamental capacity for 'action' in the sense that human beings are 'able to perform what is infinitely improbable', Jackson (2005, p. xxii, italics in original) defines the primitive 'imperative' as the capacity 'to convert givenness into choice, and live *the* world as if it were our own'. In other words, to become a subject.

An existential imperative can serve as a tool for analysing life's parallel experiences of endings and beginnings, or loss and rebirth. In the break with the familiar and the loss of previous routines, the realization of a broader meaning can lead to new possibilities – or at least give birth to the hope of something beyond the present – of starting again. In our studies, the concept has been useful for analysing events when life issues and the openness of life are becoming particularly salient, such as when a relative dies or during the processes of parenthood and retirement. Thus, it is not only historical eras that raise different existential questions. Events during an individual's life course also intensify existential conundrums.

One important point of Jackson's concept is the phenomenological assumption, which is that the existential imperative occurs in relation to something. The transformative potential results neither solely from the individual's reflexivity nor solely from structures and norms in the social surroundings. An existential imperative is the result of the individual's *encounter with the world* – with life in all its unpredictability and uncertainty. One example of this was how the Covid-19 pandemic – an externally imposed, uncontrollable event – came to resurrect and make visible questions about the fragility and impermanence of life. In the break with the

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routines of everyday life, and under the threat of being infected by a deadly virus, broader contexts of meaning for reflecting on what one has done – and wants to do in the future – with one's limited time here on earth were awakened. One illustration is how difficult and challenging tasks – not least in the caring professions – came to be recognized a calling during the initial phases of the pandemic (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2020a).[7] Existential imperatives can thus be seen to provide a catalytic effect for the development of existential meaning-making, where the incalculable events of life awaken the human desire for change beyond the present, as well as to shape something meaningful that can endure into the future. In other words, we have returned to Heidegger's (1996) fundamental idea: When the routines of everyday life are broken, people see how mundane and concrete things are involved in a broader meaningful context.

Our view is that breaking points, which evoke feelings of contact with the larger life context, create space for attempts at resistance and intervention. Throughout history, particularly crises have led to change, or at least to hopes for a different future, which in turn have provided a breeding ground for resistance in the present (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1988; Fantasia, 1988; Koselleck, 2004). From social science perspectives that seek to illuminate existential themes, it is crucial to understand how similar aspirations manifest themselves in the lived experiences of individuals. The notion that the concept of crisis is needed at both the micro- and macro-levels has been the starting point for Flisbäck (2014). A crisis – like an existential imperative – evokes feelings of contact with the larger life context, which creates space to act, resist, and intervene.[8] Like a historical crisis, individuals' images of the future may take on a transcendental power to change prevailing circumstances when a seemingly 'unrealistic' feeling – hope – is translated into concrete action. This theme will be further explored below using concepts from Kurt Lewin.

5 | A TEMPORALITY PERSPECTIVE: EXAMINING FORWARD-LOOKING HOPES AND EXPERIENCE-DRIVEN EXPECTATIONS

One focus in existential sociological analyses is experiences of turning points and transitional phases during the life course. Here the recently proposed 'existence theory' of Patrick Baert et al. (2022, p. 8) is of particular interest. The authors argue that existential analyses of people's life trajectories are centred on several *existential milestones*, understood as events that represent cultural expectations of what is to be achieved in life – for example, marriage, parenthood, professional qualifications, and career – and that constitute nodes to orient oneself by along the life trajectory. In imagining oneself in the future, and in contrast to who one has been in the past, an emotional energy is awakened within the individual that inspires the drive to achieve these milestones. Because some milestones temporally precede others, Baert et al. use the metaphor of individuals climbing *an existential ladder* during the life course. Experiences of longing, shame, or frustration in relation to an existential milestone that were supposed to have occurred often emerge at a certain point in the life course as a sense of *existential urgency*.

One virtue of the perspective Baert et al. present is that they place time, finiteness, and meaning at the centre. Their existence theory is a welcomed contribution to sociology, stimulating more sociologists to, as Inglis (2022, p. 34) says, 'think through how existential philosophy and previous attempts at "existential sociology" may be rendered once again

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productive for social theory'. At the same time, the concepts they intend to use to study what people experience as existentially urgent place a great deal of emphasis on social norms and position in the social structure. The pursuit of existential milestones, and the forward-looking this implies, seems particularly to be guided by value systems previous generations set the conditions for. The approach is useful in a methodology to uncover how existential questions are often posed and lived according to cultural scripts. Instead, here we draw on Lewin's 'field theory' as a valuable tool for studying the temporality of existence (cf. Flisbäck, 2006, 2014). Lewin's social psychological and phenomenological perspective offers a way of thinking about how life is given and experienced through a temporal lens by looking at how individuals imagine their future life in the context of a complex interplay between past, present, and future. Following this perspective, existential meaning-making cannot be reduced to an understanding of actions activated by culturally and socially imposed meaning systems (cf. Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021; Denizeau, 2015; Jackson & Piette, 2015). Existential meaning is – as we have argued – an imperative to act and thus become a subject within the framework of the given.

In Lewin's theory, individuals' actions emanate from a *life space* (*Lebensraum*), which is a microsphere at the individual level that consists of the individual himself and a subjectively perceived surrounding situation. Lewin argues that the concept helps us to better understand human behaviour, emotions, and morality. In the life space, the past as well as expectations, hopes, fears and dreams for the future live alongside the present. These temporal perspectives are constantly changing as the future and the present interact with each other. New experiences can change the way we look at and relate to the past, providing different perspectives on experiences and memories (Lewin, 1964, 1999a, 1999b). Lewin emphasizes that our life history does not follow a pre-determined timeline where events are simply stored on top of each other. *Expectations* are to be separated from the streak of *hope* that people have regarding the future. Here, Lewin defines hope as a sense of the present in which realistic expectation is mixed with a freer utopian dimension and more creative ways of looking at the future (Lewin, 1964, 1999b, 2000).

Lewin stresses how important future images are for enduring difficult situations, while at the same time pointing out that experiences from the past are decisive for being prepared for these critical moments. A German Jew, Lewin was born in East Prussia in 1890, but fled Germany during the Nazi era and lived in the United States until his death. Lewin describes how German Jews lost their footing, succumbed to utter despair, or took their own lives, when reality shattered their illusions that the equivalent of the 19th-century Russian pogroms was not possible in Germany (Lewin, 2000). Some Jews looked beyond the present, found strength in new goals for the future, especially those who had incorporated into their historical experiences – collective or individual – the notion that such atrocities as the Russian pogroms could occur in their context as well. With a broader timeframe, they were better prepared to live with the memory of persecution and ethnic extinction. What Lewin described was what we saw earlier: how collective narratives of experience can become a platform for hope for the future and the ability to see new possibilities.

Exploring how the openness and uncertainty of the future are managed through a broader understanding of the future – for example, an understanding shaped by shared experience narratives and collective memories (cf. Halbwachs, 1992) – is an example of a sociology of existence thematic. However, we must not forget that an expectation is a future image of what is probable. It is more akin to a child's naïve sense that anything is possible. Nevertheless, we can imagine that hope for the adult arises in relation to a reflexive examination of one's own or

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collective experiences of the past. Using the critical tools of experience, an imaginative dream of a different future can be born, and thus change becomes possible. But despite these connections, the reflexive examination of the past and the dream of the future may be seen as two separate temporal conditions in life space. Lewin's concept of life space thus offers a concrete understanding of lived time experiences without overemphasizing either forward-looking hopes or experience-driven expectations related to people's existential orientation in the social world.

To sum up, Lewin's field theory is a tool for balancing the sometime irreconcilable starting points of existential philosophy and our sociology of existence, i.e., the idea that human beings are both their future (not yet realized) possibilities and the unequal experiences formed in the past. At the same time, the theory enables us to analyse what William James (1912) once argued: People always act towards the future because they are guided by 'a will to believe' that a better future may come, regardless of whether the prospects of such a course of events seem reliable.

6 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

As we see it, social scientists studying existential facets of the human experience can – and should – draw on each other's perspectives. As stressed by David Inglis (2022), it is easy to present one's own perspectives as new, but more difficult to invite dialogues with earlier existential philosophical and existential sociological perspectives. In the present article, we have found inspiration both in different corners of academia and in the literature. By starting from existential philosophy, American existential sociology, existential anthropology, and 'late modern' social theory, we have made an argument for *a sociology of existence* that explores the uncertainty, unpredictability, openness, and ambiguity of social life in relation to man's finitude, and that, therefore, foregrounds people's existential meaning-making.

The basic assumptions and conceptual tools presented here should therefore not be considered as perspectives outside the sociological imagination. On the contrary, our sociology of existence relates to what Berger (1963, p. 167, our italics) claims, which is that 'sociology is vitally concerned with what is, after all, the principal subject matter of the humanities—*the human condition itself*'. The meaning is an 'openness to the immense richness of human life' (p. 168), which does not exclude the existential mysteries, experiences, and meaning-making of human beings. However, according to Berger (1963), this presupposes inspirations and dialogues with other disciplines, such as history and philosophy. Drawing on both existentialist philosophy and literature, this article has attempted to show what similar theoretical dialogues might look like, without neglecting what we see as one of sociology's most important contributions: revealing the hidden power relations that we take for granted in the practices of everyday life (cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In this way, our approach also contributes to the existing, though peripheral, research field of 'existential-sociological' analyses. While the American existential sociologists have paid attention to features such as feelings and emotions and the concept of the existential self (cf. Douglas, 2010b; Fontana, 1984; Kotarba & Melnikov, 2023; Melnikov & Kotarba, 2015), we particularly stress analyses of how existential uncertainty, existential meaning or meaning loss is shaped in relation to the unequal distribution of power and resources, and the impact of cultural norms (cf. Baert et al., 2022; Flisbäck, 2014; Jackson, 2005). Following this, a sociology of existence must include analyses of how different social groups experience the world in different ways, where the resource poor may experience

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existential nausea, i.e., experience the world as alien and not created for them. Existential meaning-making thus concerns people's concrete ways of balancing experiences of existential nausea with hopes of resonance, or to use their potentials in ways that leave an imprint, beyond their own lives.

But our sociology of existence approach does not only bring to light how social phenomena such as existential nausea are unequally distributed. Furthermore, as the basic assumption of the modern project of ever-increasing rationality, continuous development, and growth has been replaced by the risk society of late modernity, the importance of a sociology of existence has been reinforced. Consequently, for all of us, social life is shaped by constant attempts to cope with uncertainty and a constant quest for the guiding direction of our search for existential meaning. Following Rosa (2020), sociology, too, ought to explore the 'unverfügbarkeit' of social life. Therefore, studying which existential issues are attributed particular importance by individuals can be interpreted as a methodological approach to understanding a specific society and era. What we suggest, then, is a sociology that not only addresses the reproduction or 'the problem of social order' (cf. Baert et al., 2022, p. 23), but that also takes seriously the unpredictable forms of social life. Thus, insight into the uncertainty and ambiguity of existence does not only constitute the 'wisdom of the novel' (Kundera, 1988, p. 7), but also that of sociological analyses.

One way of making visible, analysing, and conceptualizing existential meaning is to find moments in life when existential meaning or meaninglessness emerges, such as studying important turning points or transitions in life (for a discussion on methodological aspects of an existential-sociological approach, see Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021). In these 'breaches' with rooted everyday life (cf. Heidegger, 1996), it may become more urgent to shape a direction for the future. In relation to this, our basic assumption is that social life is always existentially saturated, in the sense that we sense 'deaths' and 'rebirths' through recurrent endings and beginnings throughout the life course. Thus, trying to make visible their concrete expression in individuals' lived experiences is of critical importance. Here, concepts such as *existential imperative* can help us analyse how this may happen, and our *trust capital* is a key relational resource for daring to be reborn, but also for dealing with the present uncertainty – or freedom – of what is to come. In this way, the basic assumption is that the future aspect can have as much importance as the past in shaping the present, which Lewin captures with the concept of *life space*. In conclusion, people understand themselves and their social environment by determining the present, by living with the past, and by relating to a possible future. With such a broad temporal perspective, a sociology of existence analysis can take shape, focusing on the ambiguous nature of social life, the uncertainty of the future, and the processes of meaning-making or meaning-loss that inevitably emerge from this.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the reviewers' constructive comments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In the present article, we use the term 'existential philosophy' in line with Paul Tillich (1944) and Arendt (1994) regarding philosophers who shared an existentialist viewpoint, although these philosophers did not always accept being included in this category (cf. Kaufmann, 1969).

[2] Heidegger understands care (*Sorge*) as that which 'makes human existence meaningful, that makes a man's life signify. To be-in-the-world in any real, existentially possessed guise, is to care, to be *besorgt* ('careful')' (Steiner, 1978, p. 98, italics in original).

[3] One source of inspiration for Bourdieu in developing the concept of habitus was the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2014), who described how a bodily orientation guides and drives us towards the future in a sense of potentiality – 'I can!' With the concept of habitus, Bourdieu also wished to capture the sense of lack of possibility or disorientation, an experience of 'not being able'.

[4] For Bourdieu, the concept of social capital points to the reassuring impact of interpersonal relationships on the future, but the emphasis is not on the emotional, intellectual, and physical support found in close relationships. Several sociologists who have used Bourdieu's analytical tools have therefore asked the question: How should the enabling force of close intimate relationships be conceptualized? Is it possible to see these relationships as a form of capital of significance for the acquisition of power resources in the public sphere? One risk associated with the concept of social capital is that specific aspects of the trust that develops in close interaction and in the private sphere are not sufficiently considered (see, e.g., Nowotny, 1981; Reay, 2004).

[5] Here we follow the call of early existential sociology to be alert to, as Inglis (2022, p. 38) puts it, 'the objectifying terminology of grand social theoretical vocabulary', an idea we also recognize from the feminist sociology of Smith (1974).

[6] From a sociology of existence, resonance is interesting because this experience of a more existentially meaningful life is not something that exists *within* the individual, but that arises *in relation to* other people or other animals, in encounters with nature, music, books or art. Rosa (2019, p. 169, italics in original) defines resonance as 'a specific way of *being-related-to-the-world*'. In other words, the theory of resonance is built on a phenomenological idea, which is that existence is relational and directed forward towards the world (cf. Heidegger, 1996).

[7] Here, Weber's concept of calling can become indispensable for analysing the existential meaning of work in people's lives, especially in the context of the existential imperative aroused by the pandemic.

[8] When this takes place in individuals' lives, Flisbäck speaks of a micro-crisis, based on the notion that the conditions of an individual micro-crisis are not significantly different from those of a historical crisis (cf. Bourdieu, 1988).

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How to cite this article: Flisbäck, M., & Bengtsson, M. (2024). A sociology of existence for a late modern world. Basic assumptions and conceptual tools. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12416

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