

Existence theory: Outline for a theory of social behaviour

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Abstract

This article introduces ‘existence theory’ as a new approach to sociological theory and research. Existence theory starts from the assumption that people organise their lives around a limited set of existential milestones. Cultural expectations are such that without the accomplishment of those milestones, individuals may experience their lives as incomplete. Examples of milestones can include the attainment of formal education, a lasting partnership and the creation of a family, but in general the milestones which are important to individuals and their precise articulation will depend on a variety of cultural and structural factors. The achievement of existential milestones often depends on that of other existential milestones, thereby producing what we call an ‘existential ladder’. The article also elaborates on the significance of ‘existential urgency’ in that, due to a variety of factors (some biological, some cultural and structural), there are time limits on when certain existential milestones ought to be achieved by. In contemporary society, we note that individuals seem to have more choice about which milestones are important to them and when they can be achieved, although we emphasise that this flexibility is unevenly distributed. This then provides a steppingstone towards an elaboration of the power dynamics and inequalities underlying both the experience and the achievement of existential milestones. Finally, this paper shows how existence theory helps to reflect on a variety of social phenomena of contemporary significance: populism in politics, forced migration, and the coronavirus pandemic.

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Introduction

In what follows, we propose the outlines of a new theory of social behaviour that centres around the temporality of existence in society. Our contribution is by no means a fully fleshed-out model, but instead attempts to sketch the lineaments of a new way of looking at social order and action, in need of further development to realise its full potential in understanding social life. We call this theory ‘existence theory’ because of the connection between its core ideas and existentialist notions. More broadly, we acknowledge that some aspects of this theoretical proposal show affinities not only with the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, but also with those of Alfred Schutz, George-Herbert Mead and Karl Jaspers; they too, in their different ways, have paid attention to the centrality of time for understanding the experience of being human. Our proposal intends to add to these theories a greater sensitivity to the social as both an enabler and a constraint on one’s phenomenological existence. As our main objective is to propose the contours of a new sociological perspective and provide an indication of its practical efficacy in empirical research, we will not delve into the intricacies of existentialist philosophies, nor elaborate at length on how our views relate to those philosophies or to sociological approaches inspired by them (e.g. Douglas and Johnson, 1977; Hayim, 1995; Kotarba and Fontana, 1984; Manning, 1973; Tiryakian, 1962). Suffice it to say that earlier existentialist sociology exhibited similarities to ethnomethodological research in exploring the flow, feelings and emotions of everyday life (see, for instance, Douglas and Johnson, 1977), and we take a longer temporal perspective, paying attention to how individuals organise their lives around broader projects. Like Mead (1938) and especially Schutz (1982), we acknowledge the significance of the ‘in order motives’ and ‘projection’ behind planned activities, whereby people’s imaginations operate within a future perfect tense that projects the anticipated completion of activities prior to embarking upon them. We differ from both Mead and Schutz in that we situate this future-directedness within a broader picture in which people’s imagination of their total lifespan feeds into the decisions they make. Our approach also contrasts with theirs in that we link this temporal and existentialist angle with more conventional structural issues concerning power and inequalities. Indeed, sociologists and social theorists have often been sceptical of the value of existentialist and phenomenological philosophies precisely because of their alleged neglect of power dynamics and social inequalities (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977: 74). Whilst Bourdieu’s characterisation of such theories as contaminated by pure subjectivism may have had more to do with an attempt to differentiate his own contribution than accurately reflect the content of phenomenological thought (e.g. Reed, 2020: 35), the theory that we propose nevertheless places the structural features of intractable power inequality centre stage.

Towards the end of this essay, we highlight how our attention to both the temporality of existence and structural inequality overcomes the theoretical weaknesses of existing theories that account for social order. We also elaborate on the scope of our theory for analysing contemporary social and political processes.

Outline of the theory

From the point of view of existence theory, the temporal dimension comes into play in three ways. Firstly, when making choices, socially located and socially shaped individuals regularly reflect on themselves and their imminent decisions from imagined future standpoints. They try to envisage their trajectory and life-course from projected alternative futures. This is slightly different from simply extrapolating likely consequences of significant life decisions, for it involves a projection of the self into a future scenario, from which an imaginative perspective is created. For instance, faced with a choice of whether to terminate a pregnancy, to give up a child for adoption, or to leave a marriage, those involved will typically reflect upon, or load with certain types of ‘emotional energy’ (Collins, 2004: 180–182), the different futures each decision might entail. In other words, people imagine, or feel, ‘future pasts’; that is, completed pasts from these different future vantage points, and given a social actor’s awareness of chance and contingent outcomes, such ‘future pasts’ may be multiple for a singular decision. Such subjective processes occur not only within individuals, but also amongst groups, for instance through what Emirbayer and Goodwin (1996) have called the ‘projective imagination’ of social and evolutionary movements. Secondly, from an existential angle, people have the ability to reflect on their lives as a perceived whole from the perspective of projected trajectories – that is, they can and sometimes do conceive of their personal biographies as ‘accomplished projects’. They can imagine what their life stories will look like if they would lead them in particular ways and they often organise their behaviour around the projection of these accomplished projects. As in the former, imagination here plays a crucial role. Thirdly, people’s awareness of the irreversibility of time and of the finitude of existence regularly feeds into the way they act and make decisions. Decisions cannot be postponed forever and what is not accomplished by a certain point might never be achieved at all.

Perception of time over a life course is rarely experienced and understood as a smooth and linear continuum. Rather, from the perspective of the social actor, life courses are typically perceived in a more discontinuous manner, as punctuated by specific events, junctures, watersheds (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017), some of which will be marked and managed by culturally specific ‘rites of passage’ (Turner, 1969). In the existence theory that we propose, we therefore conceive of individuals as organising their lives around a limited set of socially induced ‘existential milestones’. By existential milestones, we refer to events that are considered so essential to the individuals involved (and their immediate community) that without their achievement those lives will be experienced as somehow incomplete. Since such experiences of completeness or incompleteness fundamentally involve a judgement about which events are to be considered meaningful for social subjects (May, 2015), we understand our proposal as in part a contribution to a recent body of work that has advocated to take meaning seriously in social science (e.g. Alexander, 2003; Outhwaite, 1987; Reed and Alexander, 2009). Moreover, there is a fair case to be made that being denied the opportunity to fulfil or plan such socially specific milestones threatens the ability to live out a fully human life. As Reed (2020) puts it, the ‘lack of the very possibility of projects – via lostness or listlessness, overt or covert destruction of the self-concept, or violence or the threat of violence [. . . or, we would add, social exclusion and inequality] – is existentially threatening to the humanity of persons’ (p. 34). Our proposal, therefore, can also be seen as contributing to the revival of a critical humanism

within sociology, which takes universalism less as an assumption, than as a project (Chernilo, 2017; Durkin, 2014; Morgan, 2016; Plummer, 2021). Traditionally, marriage and having children have been typical existential milestones, and for centuries different societies have reminded people of their significance through sometimes spectacular customs and rituals that mark their passage as significant and sacred events (Evans-Pritchard, 1987[1940]; Turner, 1967; Van Gennep, 1960). Religious practices, such as the Hajj – the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca – have emphasised the mandatory nature of certain existential milestones within a lifetime, without necessarily specifying the age at which they should take place.

In some cultural and historical contexts, those milestones might be more specific: the marriage might have to be restricted to a particular group (for instance, a specific class, caste, ethnic group or religion) or there might be a strong requirement for male offspring (Sen, 1990; Wooding, 2015). In societies with more collectivist traditions, marriage may be considered as a union of family units (such as the Japanese and Korean concepts of *ie* and *jip* respectively to denote the patriarchal and patrilineal ‘household’) that encompasses family-level symbolic and economic exchange rather than as a bond of two individuals based on romantic love (Kendall, 1996; Ueno, 1987).

In contemporary Western societies, such things as educational qualifications, professional attainment, or financial independence often act as existential milestones for both men and women, without which lives might be experienced as lacking. The achievement of these existential milestones is also marked by rituals and ceremonies (e.g. weddings, baptisms and graduations) which both indicate their symbolic significance and publicly display and celebrate their accomplishment. Where such rituals involve public pledges, their very publicness often reveals the surreptitious threat of social sanction if they were to be broken. Given this social salience and scrutiny, failure to obtain existential milestones has often been accompanied by stigma, as can be inferred, for instance, from the historical treatment of divorce, and of unmarried women ranging from derision (the ‘spinster’) to demonisation (the ‘witch’), the negativity attached to ‘dropouts’ from schools and universities, or the social shame that often accompanies unemployment, underemployment or financial dependency on the state (Tyler, 2020).

Given the societal and individual significance of existential milestones, actors will generally make exceptional efforts to achieve them, and their pursuit therefore exerts a major structuring force over their lives. If necessary, individuals will strategise, more or less consciously, to ensure milestones are attained. Sometimes, family or close friends take on this strategising role, with or without the knowledge or consent of the individuals concerned. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, Mrs Bennet makes frantic efforts to set her five daughters up with ‘suitable’ bachelors, sometimes to their despair or embarrassment. In contemporary cultures where family members exercise strong influence over marriage decisions, parents’ attitudes can also shape children’s behaviour over childbearing age and size of family (Jennings et al., 2012).

In the long run, goals deemed less important than the existential milestones are typically subordinated to them. For instance, cultural deprivation theories have suggested that middle-class parents are likely to ensure that their children’s education takes priority over leisure activities (e.g. Douglas, 1964) and the latter will probably be abandoned if they are seen to be interfering with the former. Alternatively, as Bourdieu pointed out,

parents may consider certain leisure activities for children to be so essential and non-negotiable for social status that they become part and parcel of existential milestones (Bourdieu, 1984: 116; 1998).

We should clarify here that we do not share with Bourdieu any necessary assumption of cynicism or unconscious self-interest through which actors pursue certain activities to improve their class positions within competitive social fields. For similar reasons, we reject reductionist models that treat life-decisions as exclusively rational calculations that aim to maximise one's social and material advantages, as epitomised by Becker's (1974) transactional model of marriage. This would be to assume transactional motives from certain life goals and aspirations. Rather than impute fixed motives to social actions *a priori*, we remain theoretically open to the broad range of empirically determinable factors that might contribute to the pursuit of existential milestones, such as a strive towards the realisation of an 'authentic' self, romantic love, economic interests, familial obligation and the construction of a future autobiography of 'a life well lived'. The theory we are proposing does not therefore rely upon assumptions as to the content of such motivations or the constraints they may encounter, both of which we see as context-specific.

Sometimes, existential milestones might be mutually exclusive or at least difficult to combine with one another, potentially leading to the abandonment of one in favour of another. In many contemporary societies, for instance, couples might find it difficult to have children *and* a successful career; they may feel they need to forego one in order to achieve the other. In those cases, we talk about the individuals facing 'contradictory milestones', meaning that it is not straightforward for them to achieve both existential milestones given the pressing circumstances in which they find themselves. Whilst existential milestones are often mutually beneficial for the various actors involved in their achievement, in other social relationships where various parties are working towards a particular existential milestone (for instance, in the context of a family or work relationship) power inequalities can be revealed by examining which party forgoes their own existential milestone so that the other party might achieve theirs. Often this decision is determined by market transaction. An example of this is found in the global childcare trade, where for economic reasons, nannies often migrate in order to look after others' children, sometimes at the expense of being able to produce, or spend time with, their own (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Parreñas, 2001). Similarly, contradictory milestones can, in some instances, change the ethnic composition of a society. In societies such as South Korea and Taiwan, urbanisation and economic development have resulted in two interrelated patterns of migration and demographic change. Firstly, more young women have moved away from the countryside to cities for better education and employment prospects whilst avoiding marriage in rural areas in the process. Secondly, as men in rural areas have faced a shortage of marriage partners, they have sought foreign brides from neighbouring countries including China, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines to fill this gap, resulting in greater ethnic diversity amongst the national population (Bélanger et al., 2010; Kim, 2009). These patterns illustrate both the power dynamics inherent in the pursuit of existential milestones (in this instance, between urban and rural, men and women, and developed and developing countries) and the unintended consequences of the pursuit of existential milestones that result in wider transnational and global processes.

Some existential milestones might also be dependent on others. In certain contexts, for instance, 'legitimate' reproduction is predicated upon marriage, and marriage is regarded as possible only in a context of material security, which in turn relies on other basic existential milestones such as coming of eligible age, achieving gainful employment, finding secure housing, etc. In those cases, we have what we call an 'existential ladder' whereby each existential milestone is a prerequisite for obtaining the next 'rung' up. There is a temporal dimension to this existential ladder in that the existential milestones lower down must take place earlier in time.

This brings us to the fact that existential milestones often go hand in hand with temporal constraints. There are four sources of such temporal constraints. Firstly, some temporal constraints have a biological dimension, the most obvious being human mortality (Turner, 2009), but also diminishing physical capacity, morbidity and decreasing levels of fertility.¹ Recent scientific advances have countered these biologically induced temporal constraints, fertility treatment and egg freezing being well-publicised examples. Secondly, some temporal constraints have a much stronger social-institutional basis as research into the life-course testifies (e.g. Shanahan, 2000). For instance, primary and secondary educational institutions are typically based around children achieving specific qualifications by particular ages, without any cut and dry biological basis for this, a point elegantly made in William Morris's (1995) utopian novel *News From Nowhere*. Whilst these educational qualifications may be achieved at a later stage to those determined by such institutions, this is usually possible only via the creation of additional institutions, such as those for adult education. Note that the temporal constraints sometimes coincide with the aforementioned incompatibility of existential milestones: for instance, women's professional careers are often interrupted or halted once they have children whilst the prospect of declining fertility may feed into the decision to try to have children in the first place. The third set of temporal constraints comes from the physical environment in which social actors' lives unfold. A warming planet, for instance, may cause mass displacement and migration, may flood one farmer's land or parch another's. These environmental variables also affect the timeframes within which existential milestones may need to be achieved. For example, couples may opt not to have children out of environmental concerns for overpopulation. The fourth and final set of temporal constraints comes from the norms specific to particular societies. These norms structure social expectations as to the appropriate age or life-stage at which a particular existential milestone ought to be achieved, and transgressing such norms can lead to social sanctions.

This final, normative and culturally variable dimension is strongly linked to the way in which the combination of existential milestones and temporal constraints brings existential urgency. By 'existential urgency', we refer to people's anticipation that they might have to forego a particular existential milestone if it is not obtained by a certain juncture. For example, high school students from social backgrounds where tertiary education has established itself as a norm may be expected to apply to undergraduate education while still completing high school qualifications. This urgency may influence students' choice of degree subjects with outcomes that would be different were they afforded a longer timeframe to consider career choices and future goals.² Existential urgency may lead to people making decisions which would otherwise have been delayed or possibly not made at all. When faced with what we have called the 'existential ladder', existential urgency

can become more intense as people realise that foregoing one particular existential milestone may lead to the relinquishing of other milestones further down the line. In this manner, existential decisions made in the here-and-now are limited or afforded by those made in the past, and in turn limit or afford those that can be made in the future. The branch-like structure of such existential decision-making therefore operates around path-dependent principles that limit or expand life possibilities in a cumulative and socially unequal manner.

For the sake of simplicity, we have hitherto assumed a relative harmony between the dominant societal or communal expectations regarding people's existential milestones on the one hand and what individuals themselves might see as their existential milestones on the other. This simplicity is often warranted since an individual's existential milestones are themselves frequently derived from these dominant societal or communal norms. Nevertheless, the distinction is important because it is perfectly possible for there to be a discrepancy, and often a contradiction, between the two, as in instances where women are expected to juggle community-based expectations of a traditional role as housewife and mother with their own conflicting desire for educational or professional success. This distinction is also significant in the context of our later discussion of 'contemporary modernity' with its proliferation of value systems and – so it has been claimed – increased individualisation (*infra*). There are other ways in which this discrepancy manifests itself: if faced with a situation where it is impossible for individuals – whether in isolation or organised into smaller cultures or value systems – to achieve certain existential milestones, they might end up rejecting them altogether, potentially in the form of collective resistance, or else rationalising a situation that cannot be changed. Alternatively, they may wish to pursue the existential milestones vicariously through others, as in the case of those who lack education and invest heavily in the educational attainment of their children. This lack of a perfect homology between an individual's existential milestones and a society's dominant expectations of such milestones provides a dynamism to our model and allows it to account for imperfect social patterning or what might be called the empirical 'mess' of social life (Law, 2004). We find this model allows us to build in greater agency than, for instance, Bourdieu's (1977) similar – though perhaps also more universally aspiring and deterministic – distinction between *habitus* and field, whereby individual cognitive or habitual structures succeed on the basis of their synchrony with objective social structures (Kurasawa, 2017: 3; see also Susen, 2007: 149–202).

Existential milestones in contemporary societies

As we consider concrete applications of existence theory from our abstract formulations, we highlight certain features of existential milestones that have become pertinent and/or prevalent characteristics of contemporary societies from the latter part of the 20th century to the present day.

We identify five primary dimensions. The first three relate to properties attached to existential milestones themselves, while the last two dimensions relate to temporal features of such milestones.

Firstly, it is often argued that an increasing number of people refuse or ignore the dominant societal notions of what an accomplished life should look like. They may not

necessarily see the need, for instance, for the institution of marriage (or even cohabitation), stable employment or parenthood. In a drive towards authenticity, some people are keen to set their own existential milestones, whether this is the completion of an intellectual or artistic project, an adventure, financial independence or sports achievement. We should note that this is not to reiterate earlier formulations of 'reflexive modernity' (Beck et al., 1994) that suggest that *anyone* is able to construct their own biographies; indeed, as we elaborate below, the possibility of pursuing certain goals is often (quite literally) afforded by social privilege. Some of the apparent shifts in adherence to dominant norms may have been enabled by technological innovations, access to which is itself of course unevenly distributed. For example, reductions in transportation costs have allowed increased possibilities for individuals to move away from environments they might experience as constraining to the kinds of existential milestones that they wish to achieve. The availability of cheap and reliable contraceptive pills since the latter half of the 20th century have also allowed women in many parts of the world to exercise greater reproductive freedom at an unprecedented level (Watkins, 1998). More recently, the inception of online communities and social media have enabled those with access to the internet to find others with similar views to provide mutual affirmation and advice about achieving or forgoing certain existential milestones.

Secondly, in contexts in which plural value systems successfully coexist, greater social acceptance of heterodox interpretations of what constitutes legitimate existential milestones often results. As Berger (1967) highlighted, the co-presence of multiple value systems in modernity – in Berger's (1967) case, religions – means established religious systems are 'deprived of their status as taken-for-granted, objective reality in consciousness' (p. 151). Although religious pluralism has not led to the inevitable decline of religion in modernity, as Berger himself admitted (Berger, 1999), and value pluralism is not entirely historically unique,³ the power of religion to dictate one's existential milestones has arguably declined in many parts of the Western world. Moreover, greater value pluralism is not singularly attributable to the decline of religion. On the one hand, globalisation, broadly conceived as the intensification of the global flow and interconnection of people, material and cultural goods, and services, has resulted in increased cultural diversity which holds the potential – though by no means the guarantee – to encourage social acceptance of multiple norms and practices, such as international, inter-racial and inter-religious marriage. The recent global resurgence of nativist political programmes has, on the other hand, seen the explicit rejection of multicultural ideals, and a reassertion of a politically exclusivist construction of the authentic and deserving polity (Inglis, 2020). Nevertheless, the resistance and controversy that such programmes have encountered are evidence that no *single* value system is likely to be dominant without sustaining substantial criticism and opposition. We might hypothesise that this modern multiplication of value systems, and the associated proliferation of often-conflicting existential milestones, comprises a social basis for the intensification of a mainstay feature of existential philosophy: the angst produced by the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of choice in an increasingly pluralistic world in which we are 'condemned to be free' (Fromm, 2001; Kierkegaard, 1992; Sartre, 2007).

Thirdly, in certain areas the diversity of plural value systems has been accompanied by the expansion of rights to certain hitherto marginalised or discriminated groups. The

20th century saw the implementation of eugenic state policies around the ideas of what Zygmunt Bauman called the ‘gardening state’ (Bauman, 1989): the exercise of state power to control and propagate ‘desirable’ national populations by eliminating the undesirable ‘weeds’. Such policies justified practices including forced sterilisation of minority groups including indigenous populations and the disabled, and the removal of indigenous and minority children from their biological parents for the purpose of cultural assimilation. Whilst marginalisation, discrimination and the policing of literal and symbolic borders is alive and well in the 21st century, certain forms of ‘weeding’ have declined, whilst new forms have appeared. This points to the contradictory developments of modernisation processes. Whilst, for instance, the rhetoric and reality of deportation is becoming increasingly commonplace in nativist forms of governance, compulsory forced abortion and sterilisation policies have declined (as evidenced by, for example, the international ratification of Council of Europe’s 2011 Istanbul Convention), and there has been a certain degree of expansion of legal rights for LGBTQ communities in several countries surrounding same-sex marriage, adoption and surrogacy. As a result, it has become possible for minority groups in these societies to pursue existential milestones which were denied to them in previous eras. Again, the caveat is that the possibility of pursuing existential milestones is structured and socially differentiated: reproductive freedom, for instance, is likely to be regulated along racial, ethnic, gender and class lines (Bell, 2010; Roberts, 1997, 2014; Shanley and Asch, 2009), and enormous global disparity in the rights of disadvantaged groups remains.

Fourthly, it could be argued that more people delay the accomplishment of existential milestones, and in Western societies, this particularly applies to marriage and parenthood. Changing social structures and shifting norms might partly account for this delay, but so do educational and career ladders. Indeed, higher requisite levels of education imply a delay of professional stability, marriage, and children. Demographic research indicates that the average age of women to marry and to have the first child in the developing world has risen from the latter half of the 20th century to present, associated with longer education and greater participation in the labour market (Bongaarts et al., 2017; Yeung et al., 2018). At the same time, economic development does not always result in cultural change. In East Asia, for instance, rapid economic change – which has included greater education opportunities and participation in the labour force for women – has not always been accompanied by cultural shifts regarding gender roles. This has created situations in which different existential milestones – such as education, career progression, marriage and childbirth – are more likely to be in tension with each other (Raymo et al., 2015).

Fifth and finally, the dawning of contemporary modernity in certain locales, and for certain groups, can be characterised as having allowed an increasing ‘reversibility of time’, while for other groups, in other locales, the opposite may be the case, and of course, the former may be internally connected to, in the sense of relying upon, the latter. Even if someone has not accomplished given existential milestones by a certain time, possibilities may exist for them to be obtained at a later stage. There are various examples of ‘lost’ existential milestones that are now being recuperated, whether it is with the help of fertility treatment or evening classes. As we elaborate below, this reversibility of time is in part a function of variable access to new technologies – as seen in online

education and new reproductive technologies, which is itself a function of social power and privilege.

All dimensions of contemporary modernity are connected to social inequality. The capacity to realise one's 'authenticity' is typically a function of privilege, especially amongst the young who might still be able to pursue some of the existential milestones at a later stage. The legal barriers to certain existential milestones such as same-sex marriage, adoption and child-rearing have been highlighted above. Higher education often leads to delayed existential milestones, but people in precarious work situations or without sufficient financial backing also face delay, or struggle to meet the competing demands of various milestones if they do not or cannot delay. As for the possibility of reversibility, this often depends upon financial resources to pay for such things as fertility treatment, egg-freezing, or further and higher education.

Existential milestones, social structure and social power

Existence theory's emphasis on the actor's relationship to time is eminently compatible and complementary with research methods including, but not limited to, biographical and autobiographical methods, life history analysis, oral history, ethnographic or participant observational approaches, and other qualitative methods focussed on longitudinal experiences. Quantitative methods such as event analysis may also reveal the historical junctures at which 'private' problems relating to personal existential milestones become publicly contested issues through social protests and political action. Moreover, quantitative demographic approaches to comparative life-course research are also highly relevant to the theory we are advancing (Billari et al., 2005). These approaches systematically compare the extent to which citizens understand life courses as structured sequences of events, examine whether norms exist to sanction life course decisions, and probe the capacities such citizens have to plan and realise their life courses. An example of such a project comes from the innovations that have been introduced into the European Social Survey since 2006. Whatever the methodological application, we argue that the focus upon existential milestones allows for analysis of systematic social forces, and does this in a way that avoids producing a reified image of social structure as a thing existing 'out there'. It reveals the systematic patterning of social life in two primary ways.

Firstly, examining dominant expectations of what an existential milestone should be for a particular category of social actor, and at what particular moment or life stage this existential milestone ought to be achieved, reveals a key element of the normative structure specific to that particular society across an individual's life course.

Such norms are typically actualised not only in expectation, but also in behavioural adherence by a majority within a given society. For example, the failure to achieve a certain existential milestone may result in the individual attributing the cause of failure to their personal qualities, rather than questioning the legitimacy of such milestones or drawing attention to structural conditions that enhance or inhibit opportunities. Such behaviour helps reproduce the *doxic* normative conditions within society.

At the same time, normative expectations are not entirely stable, as we have already discussed. While isolated cases of non-adherence to social norms are likely to be dismissed as 'anomalies' or 'failures', normative change can arise in the face of

accumulated instances of failed expectations. For instance, young people's widespread, protracted lack of financial resources might lead them to return to their parents' home or simply delay leaving home altogether, although other variables such as culture, ethnicity and welfare regimes affect how widespread this phenomenon is (Arundel and Lennartz, 2017; Cepa and Kao, 2019; Kalleberg, 2018). In some Southern European countries 'parental co-residence' is becoming the norm, although the use of pejorative terms such as 'boomerang children' reveals that leading an independent life is still considered normatively preferable. In other cases, normative shifts occur not as an adjustment due to a lack of failure to achieve the existential milestones, but as a more positive act to defy expectations and redefine normative conventions. For example, knowing friends, relatives and co-workers who have non-traditional family patterns (involving, for instance, polyamorous relationships or homosexual parenthood) may encourage individuals to hold less traditionalist views about family arrangements, thereby leading to wider changes in social attitudes. Non-adherence can also take the form of migration, to move to a country or urban environment where the achievement of an existential milestone is more possible (whether the goal is stable employment, better education, affordable housing or same-sex marriage). Moreover, social norms regarding existential milestones can be challenged through collective mobilisation, by making the 'personal' political, as seen, for instance, within the successive waves of the feminist movement.

Addressing both the oppressive and the emancipatory potential of existential milestones can help to develop a better understanding of when and how organised opposition to existential milestones accumulates to the point of initiating broader social change, thereby connecting the micro-social (sense of self) to the macro-social (political change, legal reform). Furthermore, such an approach allows us to understand and provide systematic cross-cultural and cross-historical comparisons of the normative architectures unique to particular societies.

Whilst understanding the shared norms that characterise and structure particular societies is important in increasing our knowledge of such societies, it may also stand justly accused of what the structural anthropologist Leach (1961) – in attacking what he saw as Radcliffe-Brown's defective approach to ethnography – described as 'butterfly collecting': of mere 'comparison . . . classification . . . the arrangement of things into their types and their subtypes' (p. 2). Such an analysis fails to reveal another key aspect of systematic social forces: the power and inequality that exists both within and between societies.

To avoid this pitfall, our second methodological application focuses on the structural inequalities present in instances where existential milestones are missed, unfulfilled, not considered, or socially enforced. This brings into focus not only *difference* (as the normative focus reveals), but also social *relationality*. Since the distribution of power throughout a social body allows certain actors to fulfil their existential milestones with far more ease than (and often at the expense of) others, systematic attention to both unfulfilled and enforced existential milestones provides a way of accessing patterns of inequality and uneven power distributions throughout a society.⁴

However, this second application cannot be conducted in isolation from the first, since one's normative expectations of existential milestones are regulated in advance by one's position within a particular social stratification. In other words, the definition, and expectation of whether or not one might reasonably achieve existential milestones is itself a function of one's social position.

To consider the ‘reversibility of time’, different forms of social power influence the actor’s ability to ‘reverse’ time in the pursuit of deferred or redefined existential milestones. A social actor’s capacity to re-specify a particular existential milestone (e.g. change a living arrangement, choose a new career goal, exit a marriage) or work towards an existential milestone at a later stage in life (e.g. via access to superior medical technologies or legal rights) is in large part an effect of the relative power and resources available to that actor. Furthermore, since social actors themselves are aware of their likely capacity to fulfil certain existential milestones, they therefore naturally moderate the definition of which milestones will become central to their life projects in light of realistic expectations of fulfilment.

To consider some inter-generational examples, in the Anglo-American world of increasing higher education fees, young people may choose not to attend university because the prospect of mounting student debt is simply ‘not worth it’, especially in a world where undergraduate degrees are less likely to hold a premium in the job market. Similarly, unaffordable housing, or the existence of more secure renting rights, might mean that younger generations no longer associate home ownership as an existential milestone worth pursuing. In such instances the second operationalisation may help to explain the first by illustrating how normative change within a society occurs inter-generationally.

Unequal distribution of resources is also intimately linked to the formation and pursuit of existential milestones themselves. Historically, modern states have distributed different rights for ‘citizens’ on the one hand, for whom certain rights such as the right to residence, right to vote, right to migrate, and access to social security are accorded in exchange for duties such as paying taxes, jury duty, and military service, and ‘denizens’ on the other hand, who are afforded fewer rights but greater obligations (Turner, 2016). Hence, citizenship usually forms a necessary condition that makes possible the pursuit of certain existential milestones, including legal residence, migration and protection under the law, and one that has been heavily regulated through naturalisation laws, for instance.

In the ‘private’ realm, to return to the example of a couple’s struggle to balance work and child-rearing, a wealthy couple may seek to achieve both milestones by paying for nannies, au pairs and babysitters, while others without such resources may have to rely on family or social networks for support, or forgo some milestones in favour of others. Conversely, an economically precarious existence which is focussed on day-to-day survival may also preclude more long-term planning for the future. Reminiscent of Jahoda’s tragic depiction of Marienthal during the Great Depression (Jahoda et al., 2002), a recent study of unemployed people in Southern Europe reveals how they feel ‘frozen’ in time, stuck in a ‘temporary temporariness’ and therefore unable to develop coherent life plans (Thompson et al., 2017). Working arrangements such as casualised labour, temporary and ‘zero-hours’ contracts, and jobs with unclear or absent career progression can inhibit longer term planning oriented towards future goals and aspirations to the extent that not only are certain existential milestones unfulfilled, they are not considered in the first place (Kalleberg, 2018). Working conditions such as long working hours and lack of paid leave may also have a constraining effect on the ability of actors to make decisions about the future and to consider possible career options. Thus, in addition to the ‘reversibility’ of time, we can reasonably hypothesise that material privilege affords actors the ability to construct autobiographies with *longer* temporal horizons (towards both the past and the future) that extend to, for example, life after retirement, their children’s education,

children's marriage partners, and family trusts and businesses. Much of the more recent work on 'deferred gratification' has been developed within psychology, partly in the wake of the famous Stanford 'marshmallow experiments' (Mischel et al., 1972), and concerned with relatively immediate temporalities. However, early work on social class, 'future orientation' and the capacity to delay gratification – in part stemming from Weber's ([1905] 2010) classic thesis on the connection between 'inner-worldly asceticism' and long-term capital accumulation, as well as more recent works extending Weber's insights (e.g. Kemple, 2007) – supports the hypothesis of a correlation between privileged social class and an extended 'future orientation' (Davis and Havighurst, 1946; O'Rand and Ellis, 1974; Schmidt et al., 1978; Sugarman, 1967), as does historical work, such as E. P. Thompson's (1993: 12-13) account of the development of working-class culture in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Such social advantages need not be material at all. For example, knowing a friend or family member that has attended university might influence a person to apply themselves, while others whose immediate social circles have not had access to higher education might not consider it a viable or worthwhile option; a form of self-exclusion that might be considered through the Bourdieusian concept of 'symbolic violence'.⁵ More straightforwardly, university admissions systems that adopt legacy admissions may involve inherent favouritism towards families with historic ties to the institution.

As we can see, the very idea, aspiration and realistic possibility of a coherent 'life project', punctuated by certain milestones along the way, is itself in many ways an effect of relative privilege. In sum, in order to reveal the operations of power, it is crucial to analyse not only the discrepancies between normative expectations and the likely fulfilment of existential milestones in tandem, but also to provide a comparative account of the discrepancies between different normatively defined existential milestones themselves, as well as an individual's relative capacity to impose or resist a particular milestone.

All other things being equal therefore, we can use existence theory to state that more privileged actors or groups in a particular social domain will (a) possess more ambitious *normative* definitions of existential milestones, (b) hold an enhanced capacity to *fulfil* existential milestones, and (c) have greater capacity to *redefine* existential milestones for themselves and for others, or the moments at which such existential milestones are to be achieved.

Empirical applications

Our goal is not only to indicate where the foundations might lie for a novel theoretical position on how actors plan their future aspirations, but also to develop an empirical research agenda based on the concepts we have introduced above. Building on Popper's critical rationalism, Lakatos (1970) famously distinguished between progressive and degenerative research programmes. Progressive research programmes, so he argued, are able consistently to come across empirical corroborations and, crucially, to account for a wide range of new phenomena. In this spirit, this article has demonstrated the broad applicability of existence theory, with illustrations ranging from cultural anthropology and science and technology studies to the sociology of the family and work. To Lakatos' wish list, we would like to add the ability of research programmes to comment insightfully on the pressing issues of the day. Especially in the humanities and social sciences,

it is surely desirable, if not essential, for research programmes to be able to provide new, compelling perspectives on issues of contemporary societal relevance. To this end, in the following discussions of populism, the experiences of refugees and migrants, and the COVID-19 pandemic, we demonstrate how thinking with existential milestones can help illuminate many of the pressing social problems today.

Populism

It is difficult these days to ignore the recent political volatility that has occurred not just across Europe and the United States, but also in other parts of the world including Brazil, the Philippines and South Africa. This volatility is often captured by journalists and political scientists under the catch-all category of ‘populism’, typically understood as any politics built upon an attempt to construct a people in opposition to an elite. Whether or not this term is adequate in capturing the diversity of what is in fact occurring (e.g. Morgan, 2020) – whether or not lumping together leaders like Viktor Orbán with figures like Bernie Sanders, for instance, actually obscures more than it reveals – there is no doubt that the recent political polarisations witnessed in many polities, usually at the expense of the ‘centre’, have far-reaching actual and potential consequences. We would like to maintain that the building blocks of our theory of existence may help shed new light on this socio-political phenomenon. Political sociologists and political scientists typically explain this recent volatility in structural-economic terms, arguing that austerity programmes initiated in response to the 2007-8 global economic crisis, and related rising inequalities have led to growing mistrust *vis-à-vis* ruling elites, a scepticism towards political and economic liberalism, and a willingness to embrace more radical political agendas. We do not wish to deny the significance and veracity of these structural explanations; in some cases, they have been supported convincingly by empirical evidence. But we would like to point out that these accounts often fail to indicate the precise mechanisms by which the politico-economic realities (and the shifts therein) feed into people’s political actions, choices and voting patterns. Whilst political science and political sociology is awash with broad variable-led studies of ‘populism’ and the values, demographic characteristics, and political circumstances that might predict it, there is a paucity of rich ethnographic research about the meaningful *Lebenswelten* of those drawn to populist leaders, whether Americans to Trump, the British to Farage, or South Africans to Julius Malema. However, the little research there is does provide a compelling picture of frustrated plans and unfulfilled life stories, especially if the people involved make a comparison to the supposedly fulfilled lives of either previous generations, elites or apparently undeserving minorities.

Amongst these sociological works, Hochschild’s (2016) *Strangers in their own Land* stands out and has rightly been applauded for her insightful portrayal of the emotional politics of the Louisiana Tea Party enthusiasts. Indeed, much has been made of the emotional component of her ‘deep story’, the central metaphor that resonates with the narratives of her interviewees and with which they identify. From our perspective, it is the primacy of the existential milestones that looms so large in her research. After all, the central metaphor refers to waiting in a queue to acquire highly valued, and what are deemed to be well-deserved rewards – rewards that appear always out of reach as others

are seen to be ‘jumping the queue’. Queuing is a temporal task, if ever there was one, and in the terms of the theory we are sketching here, rewards structure existential milestones. The ability to set up a home, to acquire a decent job, to get your children through education, are all promises made by democratic societies in return for working hard and waiting in line. The perceived injustice of being blocked in achieving these milestones manifests itself in pent-up anger, resentment, and a belief that indifferent elites – often through coddling some ‘unworthy’ minority groups and allowing them to cut ‘into the line’ – are bringing about their marginalisation. Through the use of narrative analysis, Hochschild’s ethnography reveals that when the promises embodied in societies’ dominant ideologies fail to be fulfilled, backlashes towards the elites that run such societies and propagate such ideologies are never far off (Alexander, 2019). In this manner, her portrait of Louisiana’s marginalised denizens illustrates how a focussed micro-sociological thick description of thwarted existential milestones can be linked to macro-sociological processes that occur on a national, or even transnational plane. This micro-macro link is the basis upon which we suggest that insights gathered from focussed phenomenological analysis can contribute to sociological debate.

Refugees and migrants

The theory of existence is not just relevant to the ethnography of the white working class in the United States. It also promises to help illuminate other issues of contemporary significance, such as how the frustrations and anxieties of hundreds of thousands of people from countries in Africa and the Middle East resulted in them taking perilous journeys to Europe. There is no doubt that many leave their homes because of imminent danger or starvation. Others do so because it is simply not possible to project coherent life plans for themselves and their families in the midst of the social and political chaos of state failure (Kingsley, 2017). In a tragic twist, the hardening of the stance of many European countries *vis-à-vis* migration and refugees has meant that many migrants face similar problems once they arrive in Europe or North America. Back and Sinha’s (2018) ethnography of the lives of migrants in London demonstrates how the stratified immigration system opens doors to opportunity for some while closing them for others. While more affluent and skilled workers can ‘fast-track’ their visa applications by paying extra fees, waiting for a visa decision – sometimes for years – is the norm for non-elite workers and asylum seekers. Legally forbidden to work and uncertain whether or not they would be able to remain in their country of arrival, they are left in a state of limbo – caught in a perpetual present, simply surviving and unable to project into the future. Stuck in what Back and Sinha call ‘dead time’, migrants are frequently left in a position in which ‘they have no right to an unfolding life without it being granted to them by the state’ (Back and Sinha, 2018: 80). As a result, many migrants live in a world in which the pursuit of existential milestones – whether that is employment, education or marriage – is withheld from them, and the flow of time is asynchronous to the lives of those around them: ‘[m]igrants who are sentenced to the condition of waiting are doubly stuck in an environment where everything around them is on the move while their lives are on hold’ (Back and Sinha, 2018: 82). Echoing this sentiment, Dina Nayeri’s memoir-cum-ethnography shows the severe consequences of this no man’s land – with its absence of tangible

existential milestones – for the mental health and general well-being of those involved (Nayeri, 2019). Existence theory provides a theoretical mechanism for diagnosing social processes that confine their victims to a perennial present, and as with the previous example, provides a conceptual bridge linking individuals' experiences, hopes and projections to sociological processes affecting large social groups, or even whole societies (Mills, 1959).

COVID-19 pandemic

It is still early days to properly assess the social effects of the pandemic, especially because not much substantial academic sociological or psychological research has been completed. However, there is accumulating evidence in the media and grey literature to suggest that the pandemic has affected and is affecting the way in which people conceive of their futures in terms of existential milestones. Some people feel unable to accomplish certain existential milestones, for instance because they have lost a loved one, or they feel compelled to delay or accelerate them, for instance because they have been furloughed or made redundant. Many people in the UK, for example, had delayed house buying (Bloom, 2020), provoking the government to intervene by announcing a stamp duty holiday to reignite the flagging property market. Relatedly, national lockdowns and the introduction of working from home has prompted those with sufficient economic means to reconsider their priorities by moving out of cities into the suburbs and the countryside, while such an option has not been open to those without a steady income.

The pandemic has also had profound impacts on interpersonal and romantic relationships: one marriage website reported the results of an online survey that revealed that three quarters of engaged couples were postponing their marriage due to the outbreak (Pye, 2020), and the polling agency YouGov revealed that 28% of respondents had decided to delay divorce proceedings due to the pandemic (Barr, 2020). Similarly, many pressures that may cause women to stay with abusive partners – financial dependence caused by lost work, fear of physical safety, concern for security of children, access to services, support networks, and family, etc. – are likely to have been exacerbated in the pandemic context (Peterman et al., 2020: 15–16), whilst at the same time increasing the risk of domestic abuse itself (Gelder et al., 2020). These latter two examples signal how milestones might involve freeing oneself from negative circumstances in the present, as much as the pursuit of positively perceived goals in the future.

There are generational issues at stake too, and the media are reporting a 'lost generation' of young people who find it difficult to obtain work or have to resort to underpaid temporary employment. Workers under 25 have been disproportionately concentrated in sectors of the economy that were closed due to the lockdowns, and have therefore been more likely than workers in other age groups to lose their jobs (Dias et al., 2020). Amongst those who have been less structurally affected, some have used this episode to reflect on their lives and reconsider their existential milestones, opting for instance for a 'slower' or 'simpler' lifestyle. One poll found that only 9% of the UK public wanted things to return to normal after lockdown ended (YouGov, 2020), signalling that this break from routine social structure has provoked a reassessment of assumed goals and values. Substantial inequalities also shape these decisions and those already vulnerable

are more likely to be affected by the pandemic, not just because they are more at risk of catching the virus but also because structurally they often do not have the means to delay or accelerate important milestones. Prior to the UK Covid crisis, 30% of low-income households reported being unable to see themselves through a month if they were to lose their main source of household income (Blundell et al., 2020). For those households that have now lost this income, we can assume that their already limited capacity to project milestones into the long- or medium-term future has become even further curtailed.

Conclusion

In this conclusion, we wish to give some indication of the broader sociological relevance of existence theory. We show how the theory enables us to provide a compelling and innovative account of an old sociological problem, that is, the problem of social order. This problem refers to the question of how relative social stability is achieved given the potential diversity of norms and preferences or scarcity of resources.

Although the issue of social order clearly predates the formal birth of sociology as a discipline, some sociologists have argued that it constitutes one of its central puzzles, to the extent that they see it as being intrinsically linked to the distinctiveness of sociology as a subject. Today, Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim are amongst the 19th century classics remembered for arguing along these lines. Throughout the 19th century, there was a strongly held belief amongst French republican circles that, with recent political and economic upheavals, erstwhile naturally evolved stability had been irrevocably lost and a new social order had to be created: a task thought to be only achievable with the help of the new scientific discipline of sociology. For Durkheim (1961, 1984) – and, subsequently, for Parsons (1949), who was strongly influenced by Durkheim in this regard – the key to social order lay in processes of socialisation and internalisation, which ensured that people's preferences and expectations would end up being more or less congruous with the social needs of society. For Durkheim ([1912] 2008), religion fulfilled this role in 'primitive' societies (Kurasawa, 2004: 106–110), while secular moral norms would play a central role in modern societies (Inglis, 2011). This view, which we can call the normative internalisation model, was dominant until the 1960s.

In the second half of the 20th century, however, sociologists became more critical of this normative internalisation model which, so it was argued, treated individuals as passive recipients of social forces. They argued that for social norms to be effective, they needed to be recognised by those subject to them. Those preoccupied with the question of social order started to look towards philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Schutz for inspiration, developing a very different answer to the one provided by Durkheim and Parsons. For Garfinkel (1984) and Giddens (1984), for instance, social order should be conceived primarily as a 'skilful accomplishment' by 'knowledgeable' individuals whose shared accounts of the social realm end up reproducing it (Rawls, 2005). Giddens, in particular, suggested a recursive model, according to which people's practical, tacit knowledge helps to reproduce the same structures upon which they relied to act. According to this 'duality of structure', structures are both the medium and the unintended output of people's practices.

Whilst Garfinkel and Giddens were right to point out the significance of people's accounting practices in everyday settings, they overstated their case somewhat when

they suggested that their model manages to solve the problem of social order altogether. After all, the term 'social order' can refer to two very different phenomena: to shared understanding at the level of meaning on the one hand, or to a relative consensus about the allocation of scarce resources on the other. Garfinkel and Giddens' practice-based theory is undoubtedly strong in accounting for the production and reproduction of shared meaning (let us call it 'symbolic order'), but less so in explaining how and why people end up agreeing about how scarce resources should be distributed (what might be called 'politico-economic order').

Existence theory presents a different account of social order to both the normative internalisation and the practice-based model, one which avoids some of the pitfalls of the former, whilst properly accounting for political-economic order in the way that the latter model failed to do. The theory of existence shares with Garfinkel and Giddens some of their misgivings about the normative internalisation model, notably its disregard for the actual accomplishments and accounting practices of people within their local settings. It also shares the assumption of the practice-based model that people are knowledge agents who actively engage with the social world, and, in that process, help to structure that world. It differs, however, from both models in taking seriously people's ability to project into the future and to conceive of their lives in terms of existential milestones. This is precisely where the production of social order comes into play: subjects tend to organise their lives around adherence to socially prescribed (and continually negotiated) existential milestones, in a manner that complies with the institutions, rules and regulations that are seen to be necessary for the accomplishment of the milestones in question. Awareness of both the existential ladder and existential urgency only contributes to this conformity. Indeed, it is people's imagination of the total lifespan that more often than not leads them to become involved in various entanglements and obligations, many of which are difficult to shed, such as taking on a mortgage, a legally binding work commitment, or childcare responsibility. In this respect, our theory does justice to the classical insight that socially formed individuals internalise the norms of their society with respect to the content, timing and importance attributed to particular existential milestones.

It is in this manner that social order is generated and reproduced in a predictable and *sui generis* way within a given society. In recognition, however, that society is not merely the functional expression of the internalisation of external norms and expectations, our theory allows for the insight that social order is continually being produced (and not merely reproduced) in the here-and-now through the complex accomplishments of innumerable, self-conscious actors. Modern social actors (and, one suspects, 'traditional' actors too!) reflect on the milestones they are expected to accomplish, and act in patterned and constrained, yet also fundamentally open ways on the basis of such reflection. Cohabiting couples, for instance, may make the decision to marry partly or wholly on the basis of knowing that to do so will please their parents or peers, or allow them to feel they have fulfilled a significant socially derived goal. However, they may also decide not to marry, partly or wholly on the basis of knowledge that society expects them to do so. Whilst those aspiring to predict particular cases on the basis of general models may find this aspect of our model unsatisfactory, we feel that this feature allows for a complexity that better reflects the manner in which order is in fact achieved and broken. Moreover,

as should be apparent, in its focus upon the variables of power and material resources that enable both the realistic consideration and the feasible execution of particular existential milestones, our model integrates an account of how not only normative order, but also politico-economic order, imprints itself upon and shapes social action.

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Notes

1. Jaspers ([1938] 1971) discusses the importance of the finitude of life in flooding life with urgency and meaning.
2. This arguably applies less to university systems like those found in North America, where liberal arts degrees and undeclared majors are prevalent, and where major/minor choices can be deferred.
3. In spite of the recent resurgence of Hindu nationalism, India, for instance, has maintained separate recognised legal systems governing marriage, inheritance and succession based on secular, as well as religious, law.
4. For an application that demonstrates this point with a focus on transitions to adulthood, see (Billari et al., 2019).
5. See also Reay (2017) for a discussion of class-based constraints in education.

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