



Educational Security, Existential Security, and Sociology

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Abstract

This article addresses existential security, an aspect of security that has to do with the sustaining of the individual as a physical and mental being as well as the larger context of this individual. The 'larger context' can mean many things, including physical reality at different scales, socioeconomic realities, cultural conventions, the political state of the world, the development of technological power, etc., which are in turn perceived by a given individual with his or her own unique world of experience, knowledge, beliefs, values, and sense of self. In other words, threats to existential security can be expected to have consequences of ontological, epistemological, moral, and political kinds. Here I look at some aspects of existential security and some ways in which threats to this security system might be addressed by education. I focus especially on the fields of sociology and social psychology and their power to make sense of the world and provide coping tools.

1. Formal and Informal Educational Security

Teaching and learning are uniquely well-developed characteristics of the human species, something we do spontaneously at a very young age. This is why education, in its various forms, is such an important avenue for social progress and is constantly taking place in both informal and formal contexts. Focusing here on formal education, one can distinguish between content and pedagogy and between the explicit and implicit curriculum; the latter is the knowledge and skills a student acquires or develops as a side product while attending a formal course of learning.

Everything that education achieves by its very existence can be related to some aspect of human security. The recent Education for Human Security Conference held in March 2023 explored how each of our respective academic areas may be able to accommodate some of the most basic of these factors, such as security from bodily harm, food security, economic security, health security, and, of course, peace—an umbrella under which other securities become more possible.

I will highlight here two aspects of educational security: the many implicit ways in which formal education helps students become capable members of society and how particularly the field of sociology can provide helpful Big Picture systemic explanations of social events. Then I will turn to the important category of existential security, which overlaps with but is not completely covered by the other types of security.

At school, the informal aspect of education starts immediately. It ranges from such things as making friends, daring to raise one's hand, and daring to speak—all extremely basic social abilities—to more advanced capabilities such as leadership and teamwork skills. This starts early. In fact, class attendance already requires initiative, risk-taking, and resilience in the face of possible adversity. At the same time, school is also a good place for the development of one's self and one's "internal" security for handling life's surprises. It could be said that an important function of the formal educational security offered by the school is that it underwrites a growing individual's existential security, and this is independent of curriculum content.

These opportunities for self-development, invisible as they may be to students themselves, actually represent a rare chance for generating what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called 'symbolic capital', an umbrella term for various types of social know-how and good manners that will serve the students well in their lives after school. This is the kind of "capital" that Bourdieu believes the children of well-established families unfairly possess, giving them an invisible social advantage, but this is clearly also knowledge that can be acquired.

And here the teacher may be playing a particularly important role by informing students about various opportunities and services offered by the school and encouraging them to take advantage of them. Students are often ignorant about what kind of assistance, services, or programmes are actually available and may not know how to ask about them.

2. Sociology as a Sense-making Tool

Meanwhile, there are certain academic subjects that can particularly contribute to educational security because they do more than just impart knowledge. Their very nature combines factual knowledge with broader explanatory frameworks, emphasizing a systemic way of looking at reality. Here, I think especially of sociology. Sociology does a kind of double duty. As a fact-gathering and systemic science of social reality, sociology naturally orients students to problem areas that coincide with this conference's identified security areas. Sociologists like to find problems and solve them. This is of course true of many fields, but in this case, this ambition is closely linked to the birth of sociology itself as a science of society, which took place during a time of crisis and transition. It is not accidental that sociology's basic concepts and theories relate to the question of security in a time of social unrest. Social security is its existential rationale.

So here we have Emile Durkheim, who coined the concept of anomie—normlessness—afflicting the uprooted masses during industrialization and urbanization. Durkheim was looking for avenues to increase 'social solidarity', the important "social glue" binding people together, which he saw as being based on what he called "social conscience" (or consciousness), a pre-existing moral bond. Max Weber, too, worried that this kind of social and moral bond had weakened due to the ongoing trend of 'rationalization' and the increase of calculation in everyday life. Even Karl Marx lamented at one point that the money economy under capitalism had destroyed pre-existing human relationships, but for him, the exploitation of the working class was the cause of social upheaval and part of the historical class struggle. By this time, the general thinking about society had safely moved away from its earlier support of the estate system, but one new theory worrying sociologists was Herbert

Spencer's Social Darwinism, which legitimized social inequality by referring to the supposed workings of nature in society.

“Social psychology, a social science between sociology and psychology, comes in handy with vivid illustrations of how our minds can play tricks on us. Our biases can make us jump to conclusions or believe in false cause and effect. Our memories can play tricks on us. We love to find evidence for what we already believe. Students also need to be aware of how easily they may be persuaded or succumb to various types of situational and group pressures.”

3. The Sociologist as a Natural Reformer

A typical approach in sociology is to invite students to use “the sociological imagination”. This moves the search for explanations away from the individual to the level of social arrangements (“social facts”) of various kinds, beyond the control of the individual. Upon closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that many “social facts” demonstrate a deficiency in basic securities, which in turn help sustain existing inequality. A good example, made visible during the COVID epidemic, was the lack of food security, as evidenced by surprisingly large “food desert” areas within main cities. The epidemic also made it clear how prevailing housing and transportation arrangements were making everyday life much harder and more exhausting for lower-income city dwellers.

Emphasizing the uneven access to various securities, which should be everyone's rights, fits well with the professional attitude of the sociologist, who is a natural reformer. But more importantly, this is a particular way to look at reality—not as full of good and bad individual human beings, but rather as influenced by larger “social facts”, some of which negatively affect people's lives—related to prevailing social norms, bad planning, or crumbling infrastructure. This also means that, although the problems are experienced at the individual level, the solutions are typically not at that level; they typically involve social-level measures, like new appropriate engineering solutions. This is one reason why sociologists are so pleased to invite students from all fields to engage in “structural” reasoning about social problems and have engineers and architects consider the social implications of even fully technical-seeming projects.

4. Developing a System of Defense

So we see how educational security is indeed a key security that encompasses a lot of other securities, how students can be directly or indirectly taught about these things, and how this, in turn, can encourage further thought about the role of larger factors in generating

social inequalities and “insecurities”. What about existential security? Concern for human well-being is obviously part of its very base. But there is more to this security concept. Another central aspect is freedom from fear—not necessarily some concrete fear but a type of diffuse “metaphysical” anxiety, a sense of general uncertainty about the world, the future of humankind, or the universe itself. Such fear may actually be the outcome of too much stressful input from the sensationalist media. Whatever the source, we are not meant to live in fear and anxiety.

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This is why it is important that the educational system help us develop defences of various kinds. It is good to know our particular human weaknesses so that we can do something about them. We need to be aware of the typical cognitive and reasoning biases of the human brain, and this is something that can be easily taught in courses and discussed in classes. Here especially, social psychology, a social science between sociology and psychology, comes in handy with vivid illustrations of how our minds can play tricks on us. Our biases can make us jump to conclusions or believe in false cause and effect. Our memories can play tricks on us. We love to find evidence for what we already believe. Students also need to be aware of how easily they may be persuaded or succumb to various types of situational and group pressures. A bias with socially disrupting effects is our deep-seated tendency to divide the world into Us and Them and side with the in-group. The good thing is that students “get” these biases and feel empowered because they can easily relate them to their own experiences.

5. Sociology as a Study of the Conditions for Making Something Happen

Sociology could actually be described as some type of “social” chemistry. Just like we do in chemistry, we are often looking for the specific (social) conditions under which a particular outcome (behavior) becomes likely at the same time as we study existing (social) structures and typical reaction patterns (behavioral regularities) at both a micro and macro level. To do it right, however, we need to point out that sociology is as interested in understanding people’s lives and subjective interpretations as it is in any apparent objective social reality. We can approach matters on the micro level of individuals in situations and on the macro level of different geographic conditions. If we succeed, we can make students co-explorers of social reality and investigators of ways in which the various securities can be improved for all.

A statement by a student in my recent Introduction to Sociology class expressed the feeling that I would like all students to attain:

“This course entirely reframed my perspective of the world around me. I now feel that I have a superpower and can dissect people’s behavior, habits, events and history as it happens around me. I know so much that I didn’t even know existed.”

6. Working on Existential Security

One of the most important things to achieve in education is for students to feel comfortable coming to class, both with each other and with the teacher. For this to happen, students need opportunities to get to know each other early on, and here the teacher is an important facilitator because she has the power to create the right conditions for this to happen. (See my article “The Teacher as Catalyst”, *Eruditio*, 2018). A good class atmosphere will help everybody learn better and have a sense of togetherness.

My students often comment that the most interesting part of a course was getting to hear the opinions of other students. I take that as evidence of success. They typically refer to small group discussions about some video we have just watched, organized around a set of questions I write on the board, or class discussions around some book we have analyzed. Students can get very engaged, especially with videos, and having watched the same video together creates a certain commonality when it comes to answering questions and voicing opinions. Of course, small group discussions can also be completely ad hoc and about anything; the point is for such discussions to happen at all and early on in a course in order to quickly make the class and classmates look less “alien”.

Group work is the best way to help students develop their “social selves,” including speaking clearly and confidently. This may be one of their last chances to fix their speaking, if it is a problem. With the right teacher, encouragement and tacit group support from a newly formed “home group”, novel, confident sides of individuals can be brought out. Group work is also a way for like-minded students in the class to find each other and work together on projects of common interest. The confidence and pride experienced through such meaningful collaborations can be seen in the students’ smiling final group presentations to the class.

The most popular projects in my classes have involved futuristic technologies identified and chosen by the students themselves. Each student group has been directed to research both the technical feasibility and the potential social implications of its self-chosen topic. It is a special pleasure for students to work on a project that they have chosen and that really intrigues them. Accordingly, students tend to look for the most provocative-seeming technical novelties but are typically able to valiantly consider the required potential technical and moral aspects and answer questions from the “audience”—their keenly interested classmates.

What, then, about existential security? Often, the presented new technologies appeared quite dangerous. Well, that was just the point! When it came to existential worry—which cutting-edge ideas ought to trigger—such worry seemed rather absent, judging from the joyful presentations. One can think of these projects as creating conditions for students to take the bull by the horns—choosing an extremely new technology and taming it—by turning existential angst into research.

7. But will it work online?

But today, some educational establishments may consider moving more towards online courses. How well will my recommendations for group discussions and group projects hold up under electronic conditions? Can group projects at all become part of an online curriculum?

The answer is yes, and surprisingly well. In fact, I found myself testing the group work idea during the recent COVID epidemic in two of my online sociology courses. In these cases, the final group projects involved a detailed analysis of some student-chosen built environments (about half of the students were architecture majors). The students responded well to my invitation to form interest groups around some ideas we generated during a preliminary class brainstorming; these ideas then became nuclei for small project proposals for six student groups that were invited to self-organize during part of our regular class time. All this was done live on Google Meet, using the chat function for continuous messaging and group compositions. The groups were finalized later in an email exchange, and over the next month or so, part of each scheduled formal class session was dedicated to group work with me as a standby adviser. Meanwhile, the regular class work continued as usual with lectures and discussion of small homework tasks. The student groups worked on their final presentations with each other online on their own time, but prepared small progress reports at my request.

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The students had been instructed about the basic principles of teamwork and the need to communicate if there were difficulties. We ran into several cases of internet failure, especially for some students who had returned to live at home. I also had some students from outside the U.S., so there were some challenges with time zones, but it was always possible to send them recordings afterwards. In general, I was extremely pleased with the creative project choices and the collaborative online presentations that the students themselves had organised and rehearsed. It was a learning experience for us all, which went well, considering that many students were originally strangers to each other and then met only online. It seems to me that group discussions and group projects can work well online but need some coordination and supervision by the teacher, just as they would under classroom conditions. In principle, I favour in-class education because of the stronger sense of presence and “atmosphere” it enables, but I found our students to be remarkably creative, helpful, and inclusive as they took on this considerable challenge. They also helped me with some technical things during my lectures. All students checked in and out and were visible on the screen.

Reflecting on this experience, I think that the use of precious class time for generating ideas, managing group formation, and driving projects forward was well worthwhile and not that different from what I do when I teach in regular classrooms. Except that I am physically present for consultation, and the groups and group members can experience each other’s presence in the same room. This has been the case for all the projects in my classes and

has worked very well. Meeting each week in person may be helpful for groups, even if most of their work will be done outside class at times that suit them, because it can speed up consideration and catch possible misunderstandings. We have to remember that today's students, even when minimally electronically equipped, are very adept at communication: contacting each other, coordinating group meetings, preparing collaborative project presentations, or whatever is needed. They also improve performance by picking up various technical tricks from each other. Project work, whether online or not, and often with students from quite different fields, is yet another chance for students to grow and discover what excites them.

8. Natural Science – A Cosmic Security Specialist

At the same time, we should not forget that the cosmic security specialist is really natural science, which has valiantly dealt with big existential matters ever since (and long before) the Copernican revolution. With Newton, science seemingly resolved the mathematical system of the universe (with laws good enough for space travel), and later it continued working on ever deeper cosmological understanding. Science toils on in an exploratory but also cautiously self-critical fashion. That is what it does. Humanity has come a long way because of science as an organized way to establish material truth. This is why this collective truth-finding system needs protection against various types of attacks and misrepresentations (see, e.g., Segerstrale, 2000, *Beyond the Science Wars*). Science is an unusual system in that it recognizes that it can be wrong. It is actually designed to find its own errors and correct them, and it has established its own control systems to do this. Science is the best tool we have as a guarantor for the aspect of existential security connected to empirical and logical truth.

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