

# The Dynamics of Existential Space in Educational Societies

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a philosophic analysis of existentiality of the space of society. The authors base their research on an analysis of the works of J.-P. Sartre, A. Camus, K. Jaspers, C. Jung, L. Vygotsky, E. Fromm, J. Salinger, S. Beckett, and other recent representatives of existential philosophy, psychology, and existential fiction. The main goal of the present study is to define the existential space and discuss the main determinants of existentialization of social ontology. The results of this study are as follows: definition of the existential social space as a space of society where negative socio-psychological tensions, the dominance of “the war of all against all”, and indifference of the society towards its members engender and intensify the existential tension in its representatives; discussion of a special feature of the social time existence, which is formed under the influence of space existence and manifested as slowing down, stopping, or acceleration of time in the perception of an existential subject; description of the main levels of the existential space and time of society; suggestion of possible methods of dialectical “relief” mitigating the existence of the society and its actors.

**Keywords:** Communication, existential “relief”, existential social space, time existentiality.

Submitted: May 05, 2023

Published: September 18, 2023

 10.24018/ejdevelop.2023.3.5.267

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The present article substantiates the concept that socio-psychological tensions, conflictuality, and contradictions of varying intensity within the society result in *the space of society becoming existential in the sense of pressing on the psyche of the society members and intensifying their existence*. On the basis of research results by Jung (2021), Vygotsky (2022), Sartre (1989, 2004), Camus (1989b), Jaspers (2021), Fromm (1994), and more recent authors such as Bakewell (2016), Crowell (2012), DeRobertis (2012), Damasio (2000), and others, the authors of the present article argue that every individual experiences existence of varying intensity (Makhamatov *et al.*, 2020), which may form an existential space within their society, as well as be intensified under the pressure of the existential social space.

For the normal functioning of any society, it is necessary to mitigate the existence of its space, which requires identification and study of the determinants of existentialization of the social space. In the present article, the authors conduct this kind of study on the basis of works by Zalec (2022), Ziak *et al.* (2022), Pavlikova (2017), Gretskey and Lerner (2021), McInerney *et al.* (2018), Murray (2006), Radaev (2022) and others. The concept of “existential social space” is discussed on the basis of the works of the classic authors in existential philosophy and psychology, as well as notable existential writers Kafka (2020, 2021), Beckett (2019), Marquez (2020, 2022), Aitmatov (2020, 2022).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The present study uses the methods of hermeneutics, comparative analysis and dialectical synthesis, eliminative induction, systematization, and other methods of the current humanities, as required by the specificity of the research study and the literature used. In the description of the interrelated levels of



existential social space, the method of ascent from the abstract to the concrete as a reflection of the logic of complexity and dynamics of the study subject is used. Notes on existential space and its influence on the perception of time by an existential human being can be found in the works of Jaspers (2021), Sartre (1989, 2003), Camus (1989b). Yet these authors do not provide a clear definition and analysis of the notions of existential space and time. The play by S. Beckett “Waiting for Godot”, through presenting the acuteness and depth of the existential space and time, emphasized the actuality and in a way set before the existential philosophy the aim of a conceptual and categorical study of the existential ontology problem. Studies of this kind can already be found within the current existentialism (McCull, 2013; Moran 2006; Murray, 2006; Şahin, 2018), yet they still lack a focused conceptual analysis of the existential social space and time. We believe that the study of the phenomenon of the existence of social space, and the disclosure of the dialectic of its formation may have methodological significance in solving the epistemological problem of objectivity in the social sciences (Martin et al., 2022).

### 3. DISCOURSE ON THE DIALECTICS OF FORMATION OF THE EXISTENTIAL SPACE AND TIME OF SOCIETY

According to K. Jaspers, the engendering basis of existence is *social communication* (Jaspers, 2021, p. 64). The cluster of contradictions included in this communication engenders existence in each individual of this society, creates tensions between individuals, and forms existentiality within the social space. The existence of the social body forms the ontological basis of intensification of the individual's existence and defines the individual's existential perception of time, which is thereby distorted and through its pressing, terrifying, and uncontrollable flow in the individual's existence turns into *Something*, become indifferent for the existential society and the person (Dura et al., 2022). Existential time is brilliantly displayed in the famous painting by Salvador Dali “The Permanence of Memory”.

The wider the communication system and the greater the number of its members with their own inner collisions, the wider and more acute the existential space becomes. Under social, financial economic, and military political cataclysms, this space may expand and include a wider circle of social spheres, while distorting and existentializing the social time of individuals, social groups, and society in general.

The initial formation of existence in the individual's psyche is caused, above all, by dialectical contradictions between natural individuality and social requirements, which manifest themselves in the course of the individual's socialization. The soul of a person conscious of one's natural individuality and uniqueness is a field of a constant battle between *the natural principle* of the individual and *the social principles*, dialectically negating the values of the individualistic principle in a human person and demanding conformity to the traditional social norms of behavior. Difficulties of life, failures, loneliness, the individual's defeats in one's efforts to overcome one's weakness and insignificance, and ineffectiveness of one's struggle to assert one's personality and uniqueness engender within the individual *existence as conscious suffering of the human soul*. The individual's existence is manifested as *thoughts about one's irrelevance, loneliness, surrounding social emptiness, raison d'être, and further living*. As noticed by A. Camus, “to decide whether life is worth living or not is to answer the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus, 1989b, p. 223).

Perception of oneself as a person and one's efforts to realize one's uniqueness within the social space intensifies the contradiction and tension between the collectivism of society and the individualism of the *Self*. K. Jaspers wrote, “even though I am inexorably chained to my social being and acquire within it my self-awareness in the mirror of my activity, I am still able to oppose myself to it as my self . . . I no longer coincide with my social Self, even though every minute I am within it” (Jaspers, 2021, p. 34). Such an objective dialectical mutual negation, emotional and psychological, moral and ethical struggle, socio-psychological tension between the individual and the society constitute the essential reasons for the generation of the existential time and space of the society, which manifests itself especially acutely and phenomenologically in the generation and intensification of existence among primary school pupils and first-year university students.

The space of a social body is formed, above all, by a system of objective relationships between the society members, aimed at solving the pressing problems of functioning and evolution of the society. The space of the society that has conflict potential, socio-psychological tensions, closure of individuals from each other, uncertainty over the prospects, the space of the society that is hostile or indifferent towards its members and thereby engenders and intensifies the existence in the souls of its representatives, is defined as *the existential space*. The existential space of a social body contributes to the intensification of contradiction between the individual and the surrounding reality and turns into *absurd* the ontology of being of the people within it, as well as their very life (Camus, 1989b, p. 231).

An artistic disclosure of the specific features of the existential social space can be found in the works of existential writers-philosophers. For example, a social space of this kind surrounded the main characters of “Nausea” by J.-P. Sartre (Antoine Roquentin) (Sartre, 2003) and “The Stranger”

by A. Camus (Meursault) (Camus, 1989b). It was the social space that turned into absurd Meursault's relationship with his social milieu and intensified within him the awareness of his loneliness, the sense of being a stranger in this life. The existential space is disclosed in depth in "The Castle" and "The Process" by Kafka (2020, 2021), "One Hundred Years of Solitude" and "The Autumn of the Patriarch" by Marquez (2020, 2022), "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" by Solzhenitsyn (1989), "The White Steamer" and "The Scaffold" by Aitmatov (2020, 2022) and other works (Pavlikova, 2017).

A vivid example of artistic and philosophical reflection of the specific features and roots of the existential social space is presented by the play "Waiting for Godot" by S. Beckett. *Godot* is an allegory of *the society*, whose supposedly "help" two beggars, Didi (Vladimir) and Gogo (Estragon), hopelessly await for years; *the society does not need* these people, but nevertheless sends them with a messenger boy, different every day, empty promises of helping them *tomorrow*, which never comes. While Estragon and Vladimir are reflecting on their expectations from Godot in response to their plea, "something like a prayer", it turns out that Godot cannot promise anything, that he must first think, discuss it with his family and insurance agents, consult his ledgers and bank account, and then decide (Beckett, 2019, pp. 13–14). In the end, «nobody comes, nobody goes, nobody helps, and nothing is done. The next day will go on for them in the same way. Both the two works end as they start in the same way. Nothing is more real than nothing on a deserted country road in anywhere of the world in *Waiting for Godot*» (Şahin, 2018, p. 1716).

In the existential space, time becomes existential, too (Moran, 2006; Murray, 2006; Rogers, 2010; Saiu, 2007).

J.P. Sartre wrote that time in human existence is indifferent, "the connection of Time is a pure spectre, while the Time itself is "a pure nothing in-itself . . ."" (Sartre, 2004, p. 241). It is true that, as shown by S. Beckett in his "Waiting for Godot", within the existential space time loses its significance for such individuals as Vladimir and Estragon, *flows outside them* (Rogers, 2010), or it weighs on them as an absurd burden of being, as happens with Meursault in "The Stranger" by A. Camus. "I hadn't grasped how days could be at once long and short", says Meursault. "Long, no doubt, as periods to live through, but so distended that they ended up overlapping on each other. In fact, I never thought of days as such; only the words "yesterday" and "tomorrow" still kept some meaning" (Camus, 1989a, p. 60). Time can also race imperceptibly, as it does for Holden in "The Catcher in the Rye" by J. Salinger.

In "Waiting for Godot" by S. Beckett and "The Stranger" by A. Camus it is disclosed how the existential space turns time into *absurd* (McCull, 2013). According to the Turkish researcher of Beckett's works Elmas Şahin, «at the end Estragon will renounce "Nothing to be done." Even the questions will also be meaningless and absurd because the answers will not change the result. As whether or not the day is Sunday, Tuesday or Friday is not important» (Şahin, 2018, pp. 1717–1718). Thus, the existentiality of the social space as a result of the socio-psychologically tense system of relationships between individuals and the complete indifference of the society to the value of its members' life turns every aspect of the individual's life into absurd, thereby engendering *the existential ontology*.

#### 4. ON THE LEVELS OF THE EXISTENTIAL SOCIAL SPACE

The existentiality of the social space is a dynamic, changeable phenomenon forming on different levels of social life, from the family to society in general. In critical demographical, financial and economic, military and political, and epidemiological situations, it expands and covers the entire society and whole conflict regions.

On the basis of the complex dialectics of the social structure, it is possible to discuss the potential of the existentiality forming within the space of three levels of the social body.

*The first, basic level of the existential social space* may include the existentiality of the atmosphere in such small groups as the family, school classes, university student groups, small and medium business companies, etc. In the family and at the basic stages of education (primary schools and first-year university courses) the existence of the individual and the social space starts emerging, forming, and intensifying.

The psychological grounds for the emergence and manifestation of existence in children and young people in the family and social milieu have been extensively researched in psychological science, analytical psychology (Fromm, 1994; Jung, 2021; Vygotsky, 2022), and fiction literature (Platonov, 1985; Salinger, 1983). Yet in existential philosophy, this problem has not been researched properly, even though it is one of the most acute problems of the education sphere (Gretsky & Lerner, 2021; Makhamatov et al., 2020; Radaev, 2022).

In school and university study groups, existentiality emerges at the initial stage of their formation and results, above all, from the fact that the children and young people within this group do not know each other. They are still strangers to each other, close to each other, and no one knows yet what to

expect from the other. The forming atmosphere of a new study group, embodying uncertainty and strangeness for the students' being, becomes their existential space. Within such a space, adolescents and young adults have, as Camus wrote, "only this density and strangeness of the world—this absurd" (Camus, 1989b, p. 231).

Because of the existentiality of the space in the new study group, every student joining it is overwhelmed by such existential psychological phenomena as insecurity, fear of misunderstanding and embarrassment, as well as fear of one's own freedom as the urge to "escape from freedom" (Fromm). These phenomena at the initial stage of formation of a new study group engender in the student the awareness of one's loneliness. If the newly formed society prevails over the individual, as L. S. Vygotsky observed, "this means that the person cannot cope with external influences, cannot respond to them with adequate reactions. The claims brought to the individual by the current situation prove to be too difficult to adapt to immediately. In this case, the person reacts to the critical situation with negative emotional reactions. Fear, anger, grief, sadness, and all kinds of negative emotions occur in this case" (Vygotsky, 2022, p. 160).

Yet this socio-psychological process includes mutual negation not only between the milieu and the individual but also between the actors forming the society. An existential psychological version of "the war of all against all" takes place, which leads to the formation of the existential social space. According to K. Jaspers, "no matter how much communication abolishes loneliness, a new loneliness is growing within it, which cannot disappear unless I cease to exist along with it as a condition of communication" (Jaspers, 2021, p. 65).

Socio-psychological studies conducted by the Russian researchers V. S. Sobkin, E. A. Kalashnikova, and Yu. O. Kolomiets demonstrate that, in both boys and girls, the nature of their conflicts with their teachers, parents, and peers is essentially influenced by their self-assessment of their status within the class space, i.e., the milieu of their classmates. The above-mentioned authors identify the substantial dominants of conflicts, such as "personal self-assertion", "personal self-defense—studies", "violation of cultural norms, deviations", "defense of one's national and cultural identity", which determine the existence of students with different self-assessment of their status among their "peer leaders" and "peer outcasts" (Sobkin et al., 2020, p. 13).

A similar situation occurs in first-year university student groups. Here, along with the above-mentioned factors, the dominants of the formation of the group's existential space consist in the difficulties of "mutual coexisting", psychological struggle for the group's respect and leadership, fear of being a weak student, as well as fear of loneliness, i.e., of being rejected, outcast by the group or by an attractive girl or boy.

An important role in the emergence of existence among the students in a group is played by the attitude of the lecturers toward the first-year students. The lecturer's tactfulness or indiscretion, their excessive strictness or leniency, their increased demands or indifference towards the students and their progress may cause mental pain to the students and turn the space of the auditorium into absurd.

On the other hand, a lecturer may enter the auditorium with their own existence within their soul, engendered by the existential space of their institution or department. Emergence of the existential social space in an institution may result from organizational and administrative factors related to dissatisfaction with the style of management, problems in the higher school structure, and lack of a clear delineation of management areas, which leads to double subordination of the lecturers and shifting of responsibilities, etc. Besides that, conflicts between subjects may be caused by favoritism, and disregard of the academic staff's opinion in major decisions related to the education process and academic research in the university.

A lecturer, especially a young one, sometimes doubts their success in establishing mutual understanding with their students, and gaining their respect towards the lecturer and the subject taught. This psychological distress deepens the lecturer's existence and engenders new existential phenomena. The combination and accumulation of the students' existence with that of the lecturer exacerbate the existence of the group space. It should be noted that a more experienced, psychologically subtle, and flexible lecturer may avoid participating in the formation of the auditorium existence. In this case, only the initial layer of existence, which has already been formed in the souls of the actors of the education process, will be present in the auditorium.

*The second level of the existential social space* is formed in the economic, social, political, and spiritual spheres of the society and results, above all, from their immanent contradictions, their instability, and emerging conflict tensions (Zalec, 2022). In the education sphere, these factors may include inner problems, such as a lack of qualified staff, inadequately high and excessively difficult demands to the lecturers, conflicts within the teaching teams, and others. To all the above-mentioned problems, one may also add the essential change in the students' attitude towards their lecturers, resulting from the extensive onset of "academic capitalism" (Gretsky & Lerner, 2021; McInerney et al., 2018; Radaev, 2022).



The emotional changes in the psyche of the academic staff, occurring during the teaching process and described by a number of researchers (Lerner et al., 2021), should be considered not only as a socio-psychological phenomenon but also as an *external manifestation of existentiality of the education space*. As observed by E. Fromm, human emotions and “passions correspond to the human *existential needs*, while the latter are determined by the specific conditions of human life” (Fromm, 1994, p. 23).

The *third level of the existential social space* may be formed in the entire society, has a high conflict potential (Bolea, 2020), and lacks definite positive prospects. The social space also becomes existential when the society is indifferent to its members' fate. In such a society, the individual is either constantly oppressed and disenfranchised, like the characters of Kafka's “The Process” and Marques' “The Autumn of the Patriarch”, or abandoned and fed with empty promises, like the characters of Beckett's “Waiting for Godot”. This kind of social space, permeating all social spheres, engenders existence in their spaces and within the souls of the members of such societies.

## 5. DIALECTIC RELIEF OF THE SOCIAL SPACE EXISTENTIALITY

The historical logic of the existential philosophy evolution demonstrates that existence is an objective fate of the human souls, its pain, its Sisyphus' stone, determined by the external social milieu. J-P, Sartre, defending his philosophy and disclosing its essence, wrote the work “Existentialism is Humanism”. Existentialism is a humanistic philosophy if it not only identifies the determinants of existence of the individual and the social space but also searches for and finds ways and methods to “mitigate” the pressure of existence upon humans and societies. The present research leads the authors to the conclusion that the problems of existence come to the forefront when society and human communication lack mercy, humanism, and evangelical principles when society turns into Beckett's Godot.

The existence in the individual's soul, existentiality of the social space manifest themselves in waves, rising and abating. Yet they are constant companions of human life and therefore it is not really possible to dispose of them completely (Akimjak, 2022). One can only speak of measures aiming at mitigating the manifestations of existence and its influence on the social psyche and individual behavior.

The specifics of each level of the social space, and the dialectics of their interrelations determine the specifics of “relief” of their existentiality. Overcoming and mitigating the space existentiality on all levels must naturally start from the space of society as an integral social body.

A primary measure in this respect is to exclude excessive individualism, loneliness, and indifference of the society towards the individual, defined by E. Fromm as “*anomia*, understood as a lack of community”. The *anomia* of the present-day society, according to Fromm, “may be disposed of if the entire social and spiritual structure of the society undergoes a radical change” when the interests of the individual “coincide with the interests of the society, i.e., when the basic principles of our social and personal life are not consumerism and hostility but friendliness and creative self-realization” (Fromm, 1994, p. 103). To complete such a task, the state needs a strong social policy, and drastic humanitarian and anthropocentric activities of political parties, public organizations, and civil society institutions, which would exclude the possibility of the citizens' loneliness, fear of the future, sense of irrelevance and meaninglessness of life by (Zalec, 2022).

“Relieving” the existentiality of the social space mitigates but does not exclude the emergence of existence within the space of certain spheres due to their own immanent contradictions and unresolved problems.

On the second level of the social space, effective ways of overcoming its existentiality are openness, evidence, and fairness of decisions of the organization leader, and their regular dialogues with the staff, i.e., formation of a democratic atmosphere within the working team. An important role in mitigating the existentiality of the social space of both a large and a medium working team is played by moral and material encouragement, awarding the team members, and expression of thanks from the leadership of the organization.

“Relieving” existentiality within the study group space (in a school class or university student group) is more difficult. The first step towards the solution of the above-mentioned problem is forming collectiveness by means of organizing the exchange of opinions and substantive disputes, teaching the culture of discussion and mutual aid in the search for solutions to problems. During this process, a first-year student joins the group organically: first, they submit to the group, and then they learn to submit their emotions to their Self. “The student begins to feel as an active participant of this life, not just an object of teaching” and educating, and acts “as a subject of the pedagogical process” (Vygotsky, 2022, pp. 169–172).

The next, more difficult step towards overcoming the existence of the group consists of the educator gaining the respect and sympathy of their students. This can be achieved by means of demonstrating one's readiness to help every student in studying the subject, one's openness to discussions, and

availability for communication. Another way of overcoming the existence of the group is to realize the educator's professionalism, so that the students admire their teacher and are proud to have such a qualified instructor, an outstanding expert in the field. According to C. Jung, "a teaching person faces a rather delicate task: on the one hand, not to pressure anyone by one's authority, but, on the other hand, to embody such a level of authority for the students as befits an adult and knowing person in respect of a child" (Jung, 2021, p. 60).

In student groups, the formation and development of independent system, analytical, critical thinking among the students by the educator (Lombardi et al., 2022) can also contribute to "relieving" the existence of the group. Yet the students must be aware of this goal and its complexity. To achieve this goal, one must explain to the students the meaning of the Socratic principles "Know thyself", "I know that I know nothing". Understanding of these principles directs the students' thought toward the Cartesian conclusion: "I think, therefore I am", and contributes to the formation of a culture of independent critical thinking.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The features of the existence of the social space studied by us show that any society, regardless of its size, is a fragile organism formed from individuals with their existences of various tensions, "absurdity" (Camus), "nausea" (Sartre). They need understanding, forgiveness, moral, psychological, and sometimes religious help from each other and from society.

Our study of the dialectical dynamics of the existence of social space has led us to the conclusion that as a result of conflictogenicity in a society of any size, its space becomes existential, which creates "extra people", absurdity in the relationships of members of society and increases existential tension in individuals (Martin et al., 2022). In such a situation, the right ways to dialectically "remove" existential tension both in the soul of everyone and in the social space are, firstly, the formation of Sisyphus' perseverance in each person, on the one hand, and understanding, as A. Camus wrote, that "he is harder than his stone", "his fate belongs but to him" and "he is above his fate" (Camus, 1989b, p. 306), on the other. And, secondly, the idea that in solving this problem it is important to build in the soul of every person and in every society a Temple of Mercy and love for the other, supporting each other.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This article is the result of a joint study by professors of universities of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation. As research professors, we declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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