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Project Report

An Interdisciplinary Model to Foster Existential Resilience and Transformation

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Abstract: Existential threats, including threats to the self, society, and the planet, are present throughout the lifespan and form a core element of the human experience. To consolidate knowledge and constructs about how people can adequately respond to existential threats, we convened an interdisciplinary working group, which consisted of eight researchers from the fields of psychology, systemic theology, practical theology, religious studies, cognitive science, palliative care, and sustainability science. The group met one day per week for 9 months to engage in an interactive co-creative process of data collection and analyses, discussion, iterative presentations, and writing. The process resulted in the development of an interdisciplinary model that pulls together the key themes of how people, societies, and systems can foster existential resilience and transformation. The model consists of three axes across which we (individuals, groups, systems) have to strengthen or stretch our "inner muscles": connectedness, agency, and time. All axes contribute to the development of our inner capacities and, ultimately, meaning and purpose, which are crucial to support resilience and transformation. Our interdisciplinary overarching model provides a common conceptualization for existential resilience and transformation that can bridge existing research to support individual, collective, and large-scale system-change work. Its relevance and potential implementation are illustrated and presented from different disciplinary angles.

Keywords: connectedness; agency; meaning; hope; long-term orientation; personal development; paradigms; values; transformative capacities; sustainability; adaptation; inner development; inner development goals; inner growth; palliative care

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1. Background

Being aware of existential threats is a core aspect of the human experience. We all face death, the existential threat to the self—one million people die in the world every week [1]. More abstractly, we face existential threats to what we create or are a part of, such as communities, societies, and cultures. For example, the suppression of free speech in the

academy during times of war or perceived national emergency [2]. The last few millennia offer innumerable examples of the fragility of human creations.

In addition, as the exponential growth of economies and consumption in modern societies increasingly touches the ecological carrying capacity of the planet, new and more global threats have arisen to humanity's way of living in the world [3]. In fact, increasing existential threats, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, natural disasters, public health crises, food shortages, and political turmoil have created increased instability and uncertainty [4–6]. These threats are producing a new level of global worry and helplessness [7–9]. Furthermore, with exponential technological advancements, including the rise of the internet and social media, existential threats are moving closer to people's near constant awareness. With modern communication and 24/7 media, there are fewer opportunities for people to rest [10], and the attention economy fuels individual and collective worry and helplessness [11]. At the same time, many professional and disciplinary fields have long-standing knowledge and experience in offering advice and counsel about how to meet existential threats [12–18].

2. Co-Creative Process of Data Collection and Analysis

To identify and consolidate existing knowledge, the Pufendorf Institute of Advanced Studies convened an interdisciplinary working group across the fields of psychology, systemic theology, practical theology, religious studies, cognitive science, palliative care, and sustainability science. The group aimed to find commonalities of understanding about how individuals, groups, cultures, and systems can constructively respond and adjust to existential threats to support resilience and even transformation.

The Pufendorf Institute is an interdisciplinary institute at Lund University in Sweden that supports researchers from all faculties at Lund University to work together on scientific problems. The aim is to be a creative forum, an incubator for new ideas, and a springboard for new research initiatives. In this context, our interdisciplinary group met for a full day once a week for 9 months and employed several methods to support the research team function and processes. Systematic data collection and analyses were conducted by each team member and presented to the group, followed by interdisciplinary learning and co-creation processes.

The co-creative process began with a workshop led by a local artist to help the group identify the key issues and challenges related to existential threats, which were then also illustrated by the artist (Figure 1). The group's joint engagement and research work were further supported by workshops on team dynamics and creativity to generate new ideas and support interdisciplinary function [19]. This included, amongst other things, a session on scientific haiku (Sciku) writing [20,21], and collaborations with artists to discuss different perspectives and generate new approaches and outcomes [22]. The results of the project were also presented in collaboration with local artists (Hillside Project) during an open workshop at Lund University.

The key concepts that were common across disciplines were identified and discussed by the group from different discipline-specific perspectives. The identified key concepts and related aspects were existential threat, including historical and contemporary understandings [14–16] and, in this context, the role of coping [23], community [13], wellbeing [24], and meaning [25]; conceptual differences among the terms resilience [26], sustainability [27], transformation [28], and awareness [29]; the role of the individual, culture, and systems to foster existential resilience and transformation [12,30]; the adaptive function of varying degrees of awareness of the threats and capacities, such as hope, to balance despair and overwhelm [31–33]; and the consideration of past, present, and future time [34] and

normalcy, including intergenerational perceptions [35], as well as shifting baselines in ecology [36] and palliative care [37,38].

Figure 1. Artist representation of relentless existential threats.

To extend our thinking, we also conducted a thought experiment: we imagined an existential "gym", a metaphor for the practice of developing existential resilience. Each participant created and presented a discipline-specific gym to the other group members, followed by a co-creative process to identify overarching themes and approaches. More specifically, each researcher summarized the state-of-the-art of their respective disciplinary field and what potential solutions and approaches it offers for helping us constructively respond to existential threats and support personal, collective, and planetary wellbeing (also called triple wellbeing [39]). Through this co-creative process and associated discussions, as a means to counteract natural human myopic perceptions [40], the group identified the important role of strengthening or "stretching" certain aspects as an intentional practice to reach required (individual, collective, system) capacities [41]. This insight, as well as existing synergies across all fields, were consolidated with current knowledge and constructs and summarized in the form of a model, which is presented in Figure 2.

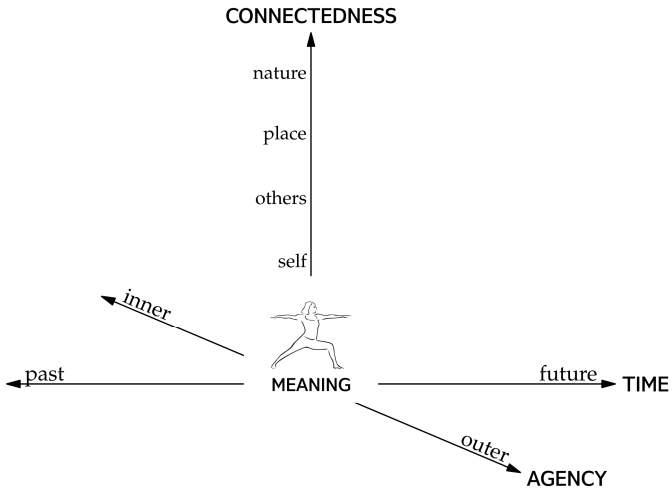

Figure 2. Interdisciplinary three-dimensional model for existential resilience and transformation.

3. Project Outcomes: An Interdisciplinary Model

The results of our working group are summarized in an interdisciplinary model that describes important responses to existential threats, a capacity we call existential resilience and transformation here (Figure 2). The model consists of three axes which we (individuals, groups, systems) have to strengthen or stretch: connectedness, agency, and time. All axes contribute to the development of meaning and purpose and open up the possibility for transformation.

Each axis has unique properties. *Time* can be stretched bidirectionally. In stretching backwards, it includes historical knowledge and experience, including indigenous wisdom, personal reflections, memory, storytelling, and narratives. In stretching forward, it includes instance visioning, art, preparation, and hope. *Connectedness* is displayed as a single direction with interrelated subdimensions of connection to the self (including the mind and body), others, place, and nature. [42] *Agency* reflects the tension between circumstance and the freedom to choose despite circumstance and highlights the possibility to affect oneself (inner agency) or others, groups, and systems (outer agency).

The axes are strongly coupled; strengthening or stretching one often strengthens a second. For example, strengthening connection by deepening a friendship can also increase a sense of agency. All of the axes support the development of meaning, which is placed at their intersection, and is generally considered a quality of the present moment, as well as an essential element for wellbeing and an intrinsic driving force for action-taking for the greater good.

While the model seems focused on the individual, each axis is embedded in a social and structural context. Connection includes a connection to others; time includes history; and agency encompasses the individual's past social and environmental context. Put together, the model is aligned with the current knowledge of the involved disciplines and, at the same time, advances our understanding and potential for interdisciplinary engagement.

4. Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Applications of the Model

In the following text, we illustrate the flexibility, potential applications, and relevance of the model from different disciplinary angles:

From a palliative care perspective, the model is grounded in current understandings of the physiology of the human threat system [15,16]. For example, it recognizes that a threat can be regulated through social connection and through inner (self) tools such as self-compassion and mindfulness [15]. In addition, the model has the following strengths. First, it simplifies the complex literature on how to effectively cope with serious illness (existential

threat), thereby highlighting effective approaches for patients, families, and clinicians. Palliative care is increasingly offered earlier in the course of illness (within the last few years of life), and a growing body of literature supports a focus on connectedness, meaning, and agency to improve patients' quality of life [13,43,44]. Second, while other approaches to existential coping focus on meaning [43,45,46] or on the combination of connectedness and meaning [47] our model includes agency, which has empirical support [44]. Its inclusion fosters a recognition that a patient's life circumstances, including the illness trajectory, can often limit the ability to cope with existential questions. Third, although not immediately visible, the concept of hope is implicitly present in the future direction of the time axis. An adaptation of the model for palliative care could make the concept of hope more explicit, either along the time or agency axis.

From a positive psychology perspective, a strength of the model is that agency and hope are tightly related. Agency is an important concept in positive psychology and is defined here as the belief that one can instigate change and achieve goals across different levels of influence [48]. Finally, from a psychology and palliative care perspective, the focus on resilience (rather than health or wellbeing) is important as it emphasizes the active and challenging (and much more practical) process of adapting to a serious illness, rather than attaining an idealized outcome.

From a cognitive science perspective, a particular strength of the model is that it functions to counteract natural myopic biases in perception and thinking. Human cognition, particularly judgment and decision making, tends to lack foresight. Near rewards are generally prioritized over future ones [40], and we tend to believe that what we will want in the future is similar to what we want now [49,50]. We are similarly myopic with regard to others; we behave more positively toward individuals perceived as from our group [51–53] or who are more available to us [54–56]. But these perceptions, habits of thought, and/or behaviors can potentially be influenced through informed reflection and action by the individual or group—what the model calls "stretching".

The model also aligns with, and advances humanities perspectives. It is important to note that models are used considerably less frequently in the humanities than in the fields whose knowledge and understanding of the world is based on assessing and predicting nature and human behavior. The scholarly methods in the humanities are, rather, aimed at understanding in the sense of interpretating particular events, phenomena, behaviors, texts, and standpoints in their specific context. However, our model can also be applied as a theoretical framework for such interpretations, highlighting and linking key existential aspects of human life studied in the humanities. In doing so, it foregrounds researching the multiplicity of answers to diverse questions: What is our identity and role in the world? What can we learn from history in this regard? How extensive is human freedom? What is the relationship between individuals and collectives? What is a good life? What is a good society? What is the meaning of life? The model thereby acknowledges the importance of including the immeasurable when addressing questions of how to organize societies and respond to existential threats on individual and collective levels. The open-ended character of the model also allows for further empirical and theoretical developments in both the humanities and the social sciences. It offers a framework that can be further operationalized above all in qualitative research. By drawing together three hitherto unconnected dimensions of human experience, it offers a starting point for developing applicable interpretative frameworks.

The model is also aligned with an environmental humanities perspective, which stretches human history toward earth history and geological timescales while also incorporating the existential dimension of being human in times of crisis [57]. This existential dimension, which relates to both emotional and ethical dimensions (and which is left out

in scientific reports on climate change or loss of biodiversity), is crucial for people to find meaning, and to offer hope and models for action [58]. This perspective could be illustrated in our interdisciplinary model by lengthening or highlighting places on the leftward (past) time direction, and it is related to deep situated and historical experiences of place and landscapes where the awareness of the layers of time can be experienced. Here, the loss of memories and the ecological destruction that takes place (addressed as shifting baselines) can be restored in negotiating baselines [59]. "Negotiating baselines works to create an awareness of these long-term processes that have taken place in the landscape and the role of human activity in the transformation of the landscape" [60], p. 293. This reminder of our deep history also serves to remind us to consider our deep future and forms an incentive for greater ecological awareness. Thus, the model addresses how individuals can understand their present situatedness and create meaning in longue durée, and how they can relate to ecological, geological, and historical perspectives beyond human-centeredness.

From a sustainability science perspective, the model also provides important insights. Looking at current sustainability science, practice, and education, it is clear that our dominant approaches to existential threat have not catalyzed the necessary change [12,61]. One reason is that the vast majority of sustainability scholarship, education and practice has focused on the external world: ecosystems, wider socio-economic structures, and technology [12,30]. Sustainability challenges are generally framed as external to us; therefore, we try to address them with external, primarily technical measures [60]. How we define problems automatically determines our responses to them. Thus, a second aspect of reality has been badly neglected in sustainability science, education and practice: our inner lives and inner capacities [62,63]. What is changing the narrative now is that we increasingly understand that the threats and crises we face reflect an inner, human crisis. They result from an alienation, integral to modern life, that assumes that the thinking mind is separate from feelings and bodily emotions, that we are all separate from each other, that some humans are superior to others, and that we, humans, are separate from and superior to the rest of the natural world [12,64,65]. This alienation is the root cause of today's increasing existential threats. It has become an inherent part of our mindsets, our culture, and the larger societal, institutional, and political structures, and also impacts people's sense of agency and meaning [12,64].

Our model supports related sustainability science theories and concepts that aim to address this alienation, such as the inner–outer transformation model and so-called transformative capacities or inner development goals [63,66]. More specifically, our model helps to shift attention to the inner dimension of sustainability. It highlights the importance of inner individual and collective capacities, while recognizing their intrinsic contextual embeddedness in time, our cultural identity and the systems we live in. In addition, the axis of time aligns with the urgent need to find new narratives and stories to live by, and the importance of integrating past and present knowledge, including traditional wisdom in this context. The axis of connection emphasizes the importance of supporting conditions and capacities to reconnect, thereby overcoming the increasing separation of self, others, places, and nature, the root cause of current crises [34]. Finally, the axis of agency supports the process of challenging current approaches and theories of change to regain collective agency for transforming unsustainable behaviors, mindsets, cultures, and systems.

5. Limitations and Advantages of the Model

The presented model is unique in that it consolidates theories and constructs from a range of important disciplines that have long-standing knowledge and experience in how people can best respond to existential threats. Our model unifies a diverse body of research, thereby enabling cross-disciplinary collaboration and communication and the large-scale

system change work needed to help people and societies respond and adjust constructively to existential threats. It can thus help to improve current approaches to support existential resilience and, possibly, transformation.

Compared to a verbal format, our visual model offers significant advantages for understanding the many complex relationships surrounding existential threats and resilience. For example, it quickly shows that the abstract ideas of agency, connection, and time are integral to meaning making. The model's simplified representation also helps to make plain, and therefore accessible, the information related to threat, loss, and dying, which can be frightening or unwanted and is often avoided [67]. At the same time, the visualization of stretching along axes to build capacities and skills to counteract myopic perceptions has broad applications, in the aforementioned areas of decision making and social connection and in areas such as emotional regulation [68] and community building [69], making the model flexible and useful for many disciplines. Put together, our model, developed from an interdisciplinary perspective, can guide education, research, and practice, by promoting a clearer understanding of how different disciplines, singularly and in unison, can work together to foster existential resilience and transformation.

As shown by the disciplinary examples, the model's strengths include its interdisciplinary anchoring, visual orientation, and simplicity. These elements allow for inter- and transdisciplinary work, as well as adaptations and implementation in different disciplines. For example, adaptations into palliative care would highlight the connection to the body and emotions and would limit the future time direction. An adaptation into the social sciences might highlight stretching "place" and its relation to time, thereby enriching the original structure. Alternatively, the model aligns and highlights key aspects of the Blue Zones, regions in the world where people live significantly longer and healthier lives. For example, key elements in these zones also contained in our model are strong social connection and a sense of meaning and purpose [70,71].

At the same time, there are also some limitations. The primary weakness of the model is that, in simplifying and unifying extremely broad and nuanced areas of study, it could appear simplistic or naive. This weakness might be particularly true for the axis of agency. It was difficult to find a precise interdisciplinary consensus for its meaning beyond [1] reflecting the tension between circumstance and the freedom to choose despite circumstance and [2] highlighting the possibility and need to exercise agency across different levels, actors, and scales (individual, group, system). However, the bareness of the axis belies the depth of the group's discussion, as well as the potential meaning of the axis (as is true for all of the axes). Specifically, in the case of agency, it is intended to present a broad range of related disciplinary concepts that can include the sustainability science concept of systematic institutionalization and mainstreaming [72]; the positive psychology concepts of gratitude or forgiveness [73]; self-esteem, as defined by Terror Management Theory [74]; circumstances of serious illness; or an increasing individual and collective sense of identity, care, and responsibility required for transforming unsustainable behaviors, cultures, and systems [62]. Thus, we see the simplicity of the model as a strength, as it allows for variable interpretation, which has enabled our interdisciplinary group to work productively together. In future work, we aim to continue to adapt and use the model within our respective disciplines, and to foster related inter- and transdisciplinary work.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the presented interdisciplinary model connects a broad and complex literature on existential threats, resilience, and transformation. Through its simple structure, it paves the way for collaboration between scholars, educators, practitioners, and decision-makers working across different fields and sectors to improve individual, collective, and

planetary health and support the global sustainability agenda. It aligns with the urgent calls for finding new possibilities and narratives to live by. It helps to shift attention to the human inner dimensions of transformation and how they are intrinsically connected with how we connect and act across time and space. It illustrates that any approaches, actions or practices offered to increase existential resilience must explicitly consider the aspects of connectedness, agency, time, and meaning to allow us to regain our collective agency and transform current, unsustainable behaviors, mindsets, cultures, and systems.

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