TWO MODELS FOR THE EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL SECURITY: SWEDEN'S *TRYGGHET* AND JAPAN'S *AMAE*

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Abstract. Pedagogical terminology is often instinctively associated with encyclopedic precision or philosophical depth. However, this tradition does not universally shape all languages — Swedish and Japanese, for example, present compelling alternatives. In Sweden, comprehensive educational encyclopedias are relatively uncommon. Many terms central to pedagogical discourse emerge not from philosophical inquiry, but from domains such as social engineering, legal structures, and everyday vernacular. Similarly, the Japanese language encompasses numerous expressions that potentially convey fundamentally philosophical or socio-psychological ideas, although these are seldom reflected upon as such. This encyclopedic inquiry seeks to foreground the Swedish concept of *trygghet* and the Japanese notion of *amae* as vital components in a framework for conceptual analysis and comparative encyclopedic studies in education. By offering a conceptual grounding, we aim to support more nuanced and context-sensitive empirical research. Both *trygghet* and *amae* function as foundational pillars in pedagogical theory and practice: they are, on one

hand, deeply embedded in cultural norms of relational interdependence, and on the other, possess a latent capacity to shape collective identity.

Introduction

Human behavior is shaped not only by individual and social responses as well as environmental conditions but also by language and the quasi-objective reality it constructs. John R. Searle (1969) emphasizes the constitutive role of language, asserting that "speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behavior. To put it more briskly, talking is performing acts according to rules" (ibid.: 33). Language, in this sense, is not merely a medium of communication but a framework through which social realities are enacted and sustained.

Pedagogical practice involves nurturing human potential across diverse contexts, each with its own capacity to inspire and sustain meaningful development. Social circumstances are a vital consideration in pedagogy as far as pedagogy is fundamentally rooted in interpersonal relationships that involve emotional, ethical, and cognitive dimensions. Especially, humanities-based pedagogy reminds us that the core of pedagogy may be "the methodical activity through which adults seek to form and strengthen the inner life of those growing up" (Dilthey 1960: 190, transl. by Norm Friesen). Norm Friesen (2020: 111) explains inner life

> "in the sense of experience, in the sense the expression of an inner comprehension which both understands and enlivens. This refers also to a growing capacity for purposes, thoughts, and designs that we also find in the world around us — whether expressed in great works of art or in everyday ideas, feelings, and intuitions".

Exploring the inner life inevitably involves delving into the fundamental dimensions of existence, knowledge, values, reason, consciousness, emotion, and language — an undertaking that demands profound inquiry, engages with abstract and normative concepts, prompting critical reflection and deeper analysis.

Within current pedagogical frameworks, there is a noticeable trend toward the reduction of educational discourse to managerial terminology, privileging concepts like standard, output, and control (Fitzsimons 2015). Such terminology risks obscuring the nuanced spectrum

of personal, relational, experiential, cultural and philosophical dimensions of the social world and of teaching and learning (cf. Castner et al. 2024). Indeed, in some instances, everyday language may even more accurately reflect the lived realities of pedagogical relationships than specialized or bureaucratic terminology.

In this article, we undertake an encyclopaedic inquiry into foundational educational concepts: Encyclopedic inquiry is a scholarly approach that systematically maps and interrelates foundational concepts across disciplines. The encyclopedic character typically goes beyond simple definitions or isolated word meanings, offering a more comprehensive and context-rich understanding of a subject. Rather than merely defining terms, it explores their historical, cultural, and ideological embeddedness. Feldmann et al. (2024) exemplify this by treating conceptual work (in German: Begriffsarbeit) as a dynamic, politically charged process, showing how pedagogical vocabulary evolves through discursive shifts and power relations. B*egriffsarbeit* is inherently comparative, revealing how meanings vary across contexts, institutions, and actors, and calling for a reflexive understanding of language's performative power in education. David Bridges (2019) reinforces this view, advocating for conceptual synthesis as a meta-theoretical basis for empirical research. Together, these perspectives position encyclopedic inquiry as a propaedeutic for comparative educational studies — enabling scholars to grasp the cultural plurality as well as the political dimensions of educational vocabularies.

This paper offers a comparative examination of linguistic terms from two languages, highlighting their partial to substantial semantic overlap and exploring their conceptual implications within educational discourse. Let us consider one point of convergence between the inner and social realms, as reflected in the semantic field of *trust* — encompassing terms such as reliance, confidence, assurance, certainty, credence, dependence, loyalty, allegiance, and custody. Our discussion explores the concepts of *trygghet* and *amae*, each emphasizing how individual identity is nurtured within a collective context. Seen with Searle (1969), they encapsulate in their respective cultures a foundational concern of pedagogical practice and principles.

Notably, both Swedish and Japanese societies have, in distinct ways, undergone historical forms of enclosure: Japan through its insular geography and *sakoku* (isolationism) policy during the Edo period (from the 17th century through the mid-19th century), and Sweden through its self-perception as an island of peace during Europe's turbulent decades of the 1930s and 1940s (cf. Berggren & Trägårdh 2006: 21). In Sweden, especially, the dissemination of educational research occurs not only via academic journals, monographs, thematic anthologies,

and edited volumes, but also to a considerable extent through government reports and policy frameworks. *Trygghet* draws from both sociometric, legal and everyday discourses.

The absence of an encyclopedic understanding of pedagogical dimensions can be viewed not only as a deficit, but also as an opportunity to reimagine a more unified framework of knowledge — where weaving together diverse cultural lenses allows comparative thinking to transform the encyclopedic gaze from a static archive into a dynamic map of human meaning (cf. Castner et al. 2024).

Notably, *trygghet* and *amae* defy direct translation to English. Terms like *safety*, *care*, *protection*, *shelter*, *coziness*, *relief*, and *comfort* only gesture toward their layered connotations, without fully encompassing their cultural and emotional depth. Thus, *trygghet* and *amae* encompass a spectrum of meanings — from familial warmth and emotional security to public safety and social welfare — though they do so in distinct ways. As explored by the Swedish scholars Henrik Berggren and Lars Trädgårdh, *trygghet* can be interpreted through conceptual lenses such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *state of nature*, Alexis de Tocqueville's *democratic individualism*, Per Albin Hansson's vision of the *folkhem* (*people's home*), and Astrid Lindgren's idea of freedom and courage. The Japanese concept of *amae* refers to a mental disposition to seek dependence on the goodwill or indulgence of others. It was first introduced by Takeo Doi and later expanded upon by Frank A. Johnson, both of whom indicate its relevance not only in psychology but also in societal fields such as education and politics. It will be also shown that well-known concepts of *monono aware* (sentimental attachment to ephemeral existence) and *hikikomori* (psychic disorder due to lack of social connection) emerge from *amae*-like strong needs for dependencies.

Trygghet

According to the *Svenska Akademins Ordbok* (2008, online), *trygg* encompasses the connotations of reliability, trustworthiness, and safety: it describes someone you can confidently depend on — faithful, loyal, and steadfast in keeping promises or agreements; the term is especially applied to rulers or people in positions of power. More broadly, *trygg* signifies a state of protection and emotional security, free from danger, threat, discomfort, or unease; it implies calmness, confidence, and the ability to convey a sense of safety to others. A *trygg* environment or location offers shelter and stability; *trygg* living conditions suggest freedom from risk, deterioration, or loss. The concept also extends to

spiritual assurance — achieved through trust in God — and to a person who possesses certainty and conviction without doubt.

Sweden's organizations position *trygghet* as a strategic resource for both individuals and society (Nelson & Sirén 2025). Enterprises are seen as key partners in crime prevention and *trygghet* is emphasized as a crucial factor for fostering a healthy business climate (Svenskt Näringsliv, online). Swedish retail thrives by embedding *trygghet* — comfort, connection, and care — into its global brand identity (Cassinger, 2018). Education policy — from the *Swedish Education Act* to national curricula — frames *trygghet* as essential to learning and development (Utbildningsdepartementet 2010; Regeringen 2022; Skolverket 2024).

According to the Swedish journalists and historians Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh in their book *The Swedish Theory of Love: Individualism and Social Trust in Modern Sweden*, first published in 2006, the keys to understanding this Swedish term include a historically rooted trust in government, modeled by the concept of *statist individualism*, which is linked to a unique connection to nature and educational aspects. Notably, the Swedish *folkhem* model, along with elements of parental affection and personal autonomy, plays a crucial role. At its core, the guiding theme is individual freedom and independence — safeguarded by the authority of the state.

Enduring Trust in Government: A Historical Perspective from Sweden

Berggren and Trägårdh (2006) describe a deep-rooted trust in government in Sweden, tracing its origins to the reforms of King Gustav Vasa (1496–1560). By allying with peasants who were a political force to be reckoned with, the king reinforced temporal power at the expense of the church (Berggren & Trägårdh 2006: 21). The authors (ibid.: 277[1]) see the consequence in "that the state could claim authority over practically every aspect of their subjects' lives", and they suggest that, even today in Sweden, the state is often regarded as possessing greater moral dignity than private interests (ibid.: 17).

Berggren and Trägårdh (2006: xf. and 24) argue that the Swedish social contract established a strong state, guided by the principles of consensus and social conformity, to serve the autonomy and territorial needs of individuals. Framing individual freedom as a construct

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1   All Swedish and German quotations, including this one, have been translated by the authors with support from Copilot.

shaped by state governance reflects an interpretative move that redefines autonomy through institutional structures. This perspective sidesteps the notion of mutual human dependency as both the root and result of egocentrism (ibid.: 71). Berggren and Trägårdh (ibid.: 16) observe that the advancement of equal civic rights is believed to be most effectively achieved by entrusting state control to bureaucratic institutions, as well as by social engeneering (ibid.: xi).

Adopting a pragmatic and non-theoretical approach, the Swedish government introduced a common ethical framework in 1996 known as *värdegrund* (Colla 2018). This concept, which translates roughly to *foundation of values*, was developed to articulate shared principles across public institutions. It emphasizes core democratic ideals such as social welfare, freedom of expression, individual freedom and autonomy regarding personal values, equal human dignity, equality before the law, protection of national minorities, a healthy environment, and sustainability (Hedin & Lahdenperä 2005). Though not grounded in philosophical abstraction, *värdegrund* functions as a pragmatic framework for promoting ethical behavior and civic responsibility across Sweden's educational and governmental institutions.

To explain the ideology that a strong state can enhance, rather than restrict, personal autonomy, Berggren and Trägårdh (2006) introduced the concept of *state individualism* (or *statist individualism*). This idea challenges the conventional view that individual freedom and state intervention are inherently opposed.

State Individualism

The concept *state individualism* suggests that the primary motivation behind the Swedish social contract is less a socially acceptable desire for collective responsibility, or the power aspirations of individuals or groups, but rather the individual pursuit of autonomy (Berggren & Trägårdh 2022: 32). The authors connect this idea to the French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville's liberal political theory: Born in 1809, de Tocqueville was influenced by both the Old Regime in France, the French Revolution, and the American Revolution. He associates individualism with equality in analyzing the consequences of the historical development whereby social movements have distanced individuals from traditional communities characterized by hierarchy and subordination: The aristocracy once played a role in checking the power of the state; "the abolition of privileges and increasing social equality were now changing citizens into social atoms without any kind of natural community" (ibid.: 26). According to Berggren and Trägårdh (ibid.), this

shift in cultural orientation reinforces the normative ideal of individual autonomy and freedom from interpersonal dependence. *Trygghet* is viewed as a state where one needs not face conflict with others, except when such encounters are freely chosen (ibid.). On one hand, the free choice of individuals endures. On the other hand, *statist individualism* suggests that individuals are not meant to rely on those in their environment. Instead, they are expected to depend on the state. In this model, the state becomes a guarantor of individual autonomy, enabling citizens to live independently and make personal choices without being beholden to hierarchical, e. g. patriarchal, or other interpersonal structures. If individuals are directly subordinated to the state, it signifies a wider deterioration of civic society and community structures and the role of the church (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2022: 25). As Berggren and Trägårdh (2022) argue, a functional alliance between the individual and the state paradoxically nurtures both deep trust in public institutions and radical individualism. One can align this, for instance, with the statistics showing that Sweden ranks first in the European Union on the *Gender Equality Index* (online), yet also reports the highest rates of sexual violence, with 41 % compared to the EU average of 17 % (ibid.): This discrepancy can be attributed to strong public trust in governmental authorities and heightened social sensitivity.

Yet, the distinctive alliance between the state and the individual can inadvertently foster social isolation. Berggren and Trägårdh describe the dual consequences — or halo effects — of individual independence as both emancipation and alienation. They write:

> "Hostility to the privileges of nobility has in Sweden resulted in a principle of relentless equivalence that leaves little room for the kind of individuality that comes from difference, such as cultural diversity or the rights held by an individual in relation to state power" (ibid.: 29).

According to Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783–1847), a key voice in Swedish National Romanticism and Conservatism, those spared from constant struggle risk moral decay:

> "Sloth destroys the fiery character of the Southerner though outbursts of violent strife; slower, surer, and crueller is the more ignominious gentle death in Scandinavia which our forefathers prayed to their gods to be spared. Beneath our harsh skies this inner lethargy is an easily acquired disease, which blunts all higher faculties, and in consequence of which the innate anxiousness of the Scandinavian character expresses itself only in a fumbling search for light, a loss

of any conception of existence, a resulting envy of any seeming advantage, and an inner discord" (Geijer 1923–1931: 35).

Contemporary societal challenges in Sweden — such as a deteriorating welfare and housing system, rising dissatisfaction among migrants, and worsening indicators of mental health — are frequently cited as unintended consequences of the strong alliance between the state and the individual, often perceived as being at the expense of traditional family structures (Berggren & Trägårdh 2022: 48). Such outcomes may represent the trade-offs for a state that seeks to emancipate individuals from traditional dependencies — on family, religious institutions, or private charity — by offering comprehensive welfare, education, and legal safeguards.

From this vantage point, Berggren and Trägårdh (2022) also connect *trygghet* to broader socio-cultural frameworks — including Rousseau's notion of the *state of nature* and pure love, Astrid Lindgren's formative influence on ideals of childhood, and Per Albin Hansson's vision of the *people's home* (*folkhem*) in Swedish political thought.

State of Nature and Pure Love

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in his book *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*) published in 1755: "It is pity in which the state of nature takes the place of laws, morals and virtues, with the added advantage that no one there is tempted to disobey its gentle voice" (1755, online). Rousseau develops the idea that the benevolence of nature surpasses the harsh demands of society and social life. In our times, religion scholar David Thurfjell, in his book *Granskogsfolket* (*The People of the Pine Forest*), revisits the enduring value of nature by describing it as a relocation of transcendence: he contends that, within Swedish contexts, the sacred — formerly linked to Christian religion and urban environments — has been supplanted by a numinous sense of nature. Nature is associated with themes of peacefulness, privacy, and solitude; in everyday life expressed through phrases like *att bara vara* (*to be only*) and the value of *lugn och ro* (*silence and serenity*). One's own person, free from any attachments, is regarded as an inexhaustible source of strength — similar to the Vikings on the high seas (Berggren & Trägårdh 2022: 53). Francis Jonbäck and Carl-Johan Palmqvist (2024: 113) elaborate that being in the wild forest embodies "a security [trygghet], but, also cognitively something rational ... that it is something that ... well it is difficult". As well Thurfjell (2020: 222)

emphasizes the fear that full articulation could diminish the essence of a person's experiences of nature, suggesting a preference for vagueness and obscurity. In the Protestant-Lutheran context, the idea that *words do things* (in Swedish: förkunnande ordet) may underscore this concern about serenity: individuals may find a sense of *trygghet* in the tranquil essence of nature, rather than fixating on language, which can be regarded as a medium that conceals inherent ambiguity and invites excessive analysis (ibid.). *Trygghet*, as a gift of nature, allows one to experience freedom from the common considerations required in close interactions with others. Berggren and Trägårdh (2022: 80) illustrate the Swedish ideal of *trygghet* through the evocative example of "a simple country girl in Värmland [Sweden], who would laugh if her husband asked her what love was but whose entire being contains the answer". This image captures what the authors describe as natural authenticity in human relationships: a quiet, unspoken understanding rooted in emotional integrity rather than verbal articulation. The scholars connect the notion of ineffable love — understood as pure love — to their earlier conception of a social framework that enables individuals to form relationships rooted in autonomy, free from dependency or coercion. In this context, *trygghet* is not merely about safety or comfort — it also embodies a cultural ideal of emotionally attuned, egalitarian relationships that balance personal autonomy with profound connection. This raises a profound question: how can authentic devotion coexist with the distant autonomy of individual freedom?

Kindness

According to Stefan Einhorn, a Swedish professor of oncology and author of *Konsten att vara snäll* (*The Art of Being Nice*, 2005), *att vara snäll*, i. e. *kindness*, is not merely a moral virtue but a form of enlightened self-interest and ethical wisdom. Drawing on scientific studies, he demonstrates that benevolent behavior yields tangible benefits for the individual — enhancing well-being, relationships, and even success. In this view, kindness becomes a rational and rewarding life strategy. Berggren and Trägårdh (2022: 28) extend this idea by suggesting that acts of kindness can also serve as a means of detachment from the concrete other. In their framework, giving oneself to others in kindness does not necessarily imply emotional entanglement or dependency. Rather, it can reflect a form of ethical autonomy — where care is offered freely, without obligation, and in a way that preserves the giver's independence.

Drawing on Berggren and Trägårdh (2022), we observe the view that pure love represents, at most, a tranquil state of nature — and that individual independence may underpin the foundations of Sweden's social contract. These two ideas shape what the authors refer to as the *Swedish Theory of Love*. Thus, emphasized is a heightened sensitivity to the dilemma of interpersonal dependency, with particular attention to how the fear of dependence fosters resistance to forms of love characterized by asymmetric power dynamics (ibid.: 35). The importance of freely choosing one's relationships is strongly emphasized (ibid.: 34). Given this specific dynamic of interpersonal bonding, it is important to examine the respect for children and parental love.

Educational Dimension of *Trygghet*

The Swedish feminist writer Ellen Key, born in 1849, is an early precursor to the high valorization of the child. Two generations later, the renowned children's author Astrid Lindgren received the *Peace Prize of the German Book Trade* during a ceremony at the St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt/Main. In her acceptance speech in 1978, she recounted the story of an old lady that poignantly illustrated children's deep sensitivity to violence and oppression, and how even their smallest actions can advance the cause of peace: when the old lady was a young mother, her little son misbehaved, and she asked him to bring her a stick for punishment. The boy took a long time to return, finally bringing back a stone instead. Through tears, he explained that he couldn't find a stick, but she could throw the stone at him. Out of sympathy, the mother decided against punishing her child (Lindgren 2018)[2].

In these contexts, *trygghet* of children is primarily viewed as protection against physical violence and concrete psychological threats. In the 1970s, in Sweden comprehensive family law reforms resulted in the establishment of organizations like BRIS (*Children's Rights in Society*). However, between the 1940s and 1970s, the elevation of *trygghet* as a societal right — while framed as progressive — also enabled state interventions into sterilizations, abortions, and child adoptions that blurred the line between social care and coercive biopolitical control (cf. Ladd-Taylor 2014). Today, the physical dimension of *trygghet* is particularly evident in the comparatively strong role of school nurses in Swedish schools who keep records of the students' health. Besides

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2   Lindgren's urgent appeal has influenced the United Nations' international efforts to prevent and eliminate all violence against children. For example, in 1989, *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* was launched.

physical integrity, *trygghet* is legally linked to the inclusivity of schools as a fundamental right for all students (Regeringen 2022). If a student does not feel *trygg* (comfortable, safe, cozy) at school, a serious investigation will follow. For this goal, also *emergency schools* (*akutskolor*) have been established: Students are placed in these schools only in cases of severe and persistent disruptive behavior that compromises a safe and supportive learning environment. The goal is to prepare them for (re)integration into their home school.

Parental Love and *Folkhemmet*

Equality as basic rule embraces "a love built not on mutual dependence but on a foundation of autonomy" (Berggren & Trägårdh 2022: 34). Berggren and Trägårdh (ibid.: 35) write: as adults "value their own self-reliance; they want to socialize with their children and grandchildren because they choose to". This is highlighted as consistent with a prevailing tendency to define social competence — particularly in youth — in terms of one's ability to navigate life autonomously (ibid.: 10). The most common age for children in Sweden to leave home is between 18 and 19 years old, compared to the EU average of 26 (Eurostat 2023, online). Young adults have comparatively loose contact to their parents (Berggren & Trägårdh 2022: 34). Regarding marital questions, historically, "parents did not decide whom their children should marry but let them make their own decision by night courting" (ibid.). This custom — where young men and women are allowed to share overnight companionship — can be traced back through centuries of cultural practice. In 2006, Trädgårdh and Berggren issued the book *Is the Swede Human: Autonomy and Community in Modern Sweden* in which they unfold the idea of independence and the feeling of freedom as prior to being subordinate to the nuclear family. They argue that the secondary position of the nuclear family aligns with the Swedish social contract, which embodies the concept of a *people's home* (*folkhem*) of Per Albin Hansson in 1928, then leader of Sweden's Social Democratic Workers' Party. According to this societal model, the state is viewed positively as a family — a paternalistic home for all citizens, safeguarding moral rules. As a result, "intermediary associations — once responsible for providing health services and nursing care — came to be negatively associated with hierarchical and familial social structures, reinforcing skepticism toward dependency within relational contexts" (ibid.: 30). In contrast to models that prioritize familial or communal responsibility, the welfare state operates on a logic of individualization, positioning the citizen as the primary unit of entitlement and

intervention. All political parties in Sweden, from Far Left to Far Right, support the *folkhem*-idea (Aarhus University, online). The vision of a unified, egalitarian society forms the ideological basis for *trygghet*, framing security not merely as personal comfort but as a collective right upheld by the welfare state.

At its core, in one sense, *trygghet* seem to evoke a kind of natural purity — a baseline of human dignity and safety that should exist without interference. This echoes Rousseau's idea of the *state of nature* as a peaceful, egalitarian condition before the corruption of society. On the flip side, *trygghet* represents a form of *statist individualism*, where the state guarantees personal well-being through strong welfare systems. Historically, this dependency extends to biopolitical governance, with historical policies around sterilization, abortion, and adoption reflecting how state-defined *trygghet* could override personal autonomy. Crucially, this alignment is driven by rational self-interest — individuals cooperate with the state not out of loyalty, but because it offers the most secure and efficient path to a stable life. Taken together, these elements illustrate how *trygghet* — while rooted in the promise of safety — can evolve into a system that reshapes identity, autonomy, and the fabric of civic life. This conclusion suggests that a political concept cannot be separated from its psychological counterpart. When a state serves as an unbiased and competent guardian, it corresponds to citizens' disposition to be more self-sufficient among one another, but inversely more demanding of public institutions.

The following section will reverse this analytical trajectory, yet arrive at similarly revealing outcomes. When translating *trygghet* into Japanese, *amae* may serve as a culturally resonant equivalent, capturing aspects of emotional dependence and interpersonal comfort. *Amae* reflects a distinctive psychological orientation within Japanese society, shaping foundational understandings of family, education, and governance.

Amae

To enrich encyclopedic knowledge, it is desirable to compare *trygghet* with a term in another language that has similar cultural uniqueness and general applicability. The Japanese term *amae* fits this description, as it also conveys a strong feeling of dependency, although the details and contexts of the two concepts differ. While *trygghet* is foremost studied in governmental discourse, *amae* primarily occurs in everyday language, signifying a naïve mental state of an infant. It is occasionally

used by politicians but does not originally belong to scientific ter-
minology or political rhetoric. For instance, dependent personality
disorder (DPD), which has manifestations similar to *amae*, is transla-
ted using a different, more formal term, *izon*. Nonetheless, *amae* has
achieved scientific recognition because the psychologist Takeo Doi
has given it a particular nuance applicable to both other fields of re-
search and other cultural contexts. When *amae*, as a certain aspect of
human behavior, fosters mutual dependencies among closely related
family members or friends, the same need for dependency can be ex-
trapolated to other situations that involve specific group dynamics or
to the state as an impartial and competent guardian. By exploring the
philosophical depth of the concept, its general value for education will
be demonstrated and compared with *trygghet*.

Strong Trust in Fellow Beings: Historical and Psychological Context

Hajime Nakamura (1991: 413) describes the historical development of
the Japanese people, as opposed to the early nomadic Indo-Europeans
who lived by hunting:

> "Japanese society [...] developed from small localized farming
> communities. [...] People living on rice inevitably have to settle
> permanently in one place. In such a society "families" continue on,
> generation after generations. Genealogies and kinships of families
> through long years become so well known by its members that
> the society as a whole takes on the appearance of a family. In such
> a society, individuals are closely bound to each other and they form
> an exclusive social nexus. Here an individual who asserts himself will
> hurt the feelings of others and thereby do harm to himself".

Against this historical backdrop, it is plausible that the Japanese
mentality and language reflect exclusive collectivism or sociability.
The concept of *amae* encapsulates this tendency in both everyday lan-
guage and practice. The term is derived from the word *amai*, meaning
sweet or palatable, and indicates a particular aspect of human nature,
namely, the tendency to seek (and take for granted) a pleasant (sweet)
relationship of dependency on others, exemplified in a child-to-mo-
ther relationship (Doi 1962; Doi 1973). Even when it does not fully cap-
ture its culturally imbued meaning (cf. Erdman 2010), this idea can be
clarified with attachment theory (Bowlby 1977), if this latter is under-
stood to be applicable across various ages and genders.

If the concept is approached neutrally as social interdependency, its characteristic features can already be observed in Confucian tradition and anthropology, to which Japanese culture owes much. For instance, the Chinese Confucian thinker Mencius (4th century B.C.) articulates: "Between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; between friends, fidelity" (Legge 1861: 127f.). However, Nakamura (1991: 420) emphasizes that the concept of family is perceived and developed differently in China and Japan. Moreover, although *amae* signifies dependency, it is not a general term found in history books or official writings. Rather, it is a term that is used in everyday conversation. To borrow Husserl's terminology, *amae* is anchored in the lifeworld as a phenomenon, preceding conscious conceptualizations. For this reason, its meaning must be examined within its specific cultural context of Japan, as Takeo Doi was the first to notice this trivial yet distinctive phenomenon. He introduced *amae* to broader scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s as "dependency needs" (Doi 1962: 3), whose neglect or non-fulfillment can lead to a detrimental state of ego or psychic abnormalities like anxiety, hysteria, and schizophrenia. Doi notes that this mental disposition has deep roots in Japanese tradition, such as in the concept of *giri* (feeling of indebtedness) and *ninjo* (sympathy) (Doi 1973: 33–35). He traces its provenance further back to *monono aware* (a sentimental attachment to objects due to their ephemeral nature, which primarily expresses an aesthetic quality) and claims: "I would suggest that the basic emotional urge that has fashioned the Japanese for two thousand years is none other than the "amae" mentality" (ibid.: 82). Doi contends that a childlike affection of *amae* was not judged by ancient Japanese society as primitive and has upheld social relationships between the emperor and the people in Japan's family-based society. The psychiatrist and philosopher Bin Kimura (1972), proposes a similar approach but uses a different Japanese term *aida*, meaning *betweenness*, which is free of the infantile tinge of *amae* and defines both the dependency of self on others and its relationship with the natural environment. This means that the self is formed and continuously shaped in the relational space with others. The concept of *aida* can be traced back to the Japanese historian and moral philosopher Tetsurō Watsuji (1996), whose community ethics is based on various intersubjective relationships that regulate individuals, as already demonstrated in Mencius' quotation. However, *amae* does not simply mean the existence of a certain dependency, such as the mother-child-relationship, but a strategy and a social program to normatively define and promote this type of intimate dependencies.

Debates on the Multidimensionality of *Amae*

Doi's notion of *amae* is constitutive in the construction of *a self among other selves*. One needs others to depend upon to achieve and sustain psychic stability. Nonetheless, this definition does not necessarily correspond to the everyday usage of *amae*. The Japanese US-American scholar Kazuko Y. Behrens (2004: 2) highlights the multifaceted quality of *amae* and questions the definition of *amae* as dependency on others, because those who engage in *amae* are often capable of doing things independently. A typical example or situation from Japanese everyday life is child's overdependence on a caretaker for tasks such as dressing, eating, and cleaning. While *amae* (noun) or *amaeru* (verb) is said to have no direct equivalent in English (Doi 1962: 1), the term "indulgence" captures a sense of this concept (cf. indulgent dependence: Doi 1996: ix). According to George A. DeVos, quoted by Behrens (2004: 2) in personal communication, *amae* embodies "the presumption on others to be indulgent and accepting". The Social Psychologist Susumu Yamaguchi (2004: 29) further reformulates the definition in a more negative direction as "presumed acceptance of one's inappropriate behavior or request". His perspective on "Japanese folk psychology" (ibid.: 28) suggests that *amae*, like indulgence, can represent a wrong or undesirable behavior of seeking dependence where it is unnecessary. When a child asks a parent to dress him despite being capable, it may seem spoiled, yet it expresses deep trust and emotional closeness. The act is enjoyed as shared intimacy, not utility — unlike being dressed by a robot — even if the *amae* gesture carries manipulative undertones.

Despite such critiques, the following investigation adopts Doi's concept, as translating *amae* into presumptuous self-indulgence may obscure the essence of *amae* psychology. To indulge means to "to allow yourself or another person to have something enjoyable, especially more than is good for you".[3] However, the primary object of enjoyment in *amae* is not a thing or an activity but rather a personal relationship. According to Doi (1962), *amae* reflects a healthy psychological state that fosters close interpersonal bonds, regardless of shared activities or tasks. When dealing with material goods, the Japanese might say *zeitaku suru*, meaning to *allow oneself luxuries*. For activities, one might say *muchu ni naru*, which means to *forget oneself in doing something*. *Amae* aligns with neither of these phrases. The reason for this discrepancy lies in the difference in emphasis and nuance. *Amaeru* (to perform *amae*) means *to allow yourself to have something enjoyable*

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3 Cambridge dictionary: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/indulge.

with another person, while *amaesaseru* (to let someone *amaeru*) is *to allow another person to have something enjoyable with you*.[4] In either case, it is secondary whether this *something enjoyable* is legitimate, deceptive, manipulative, exploitive, or otherwise.

The phenomenon of *amae*, insofar as Doi generally conceives it, encompasses all relationships in which one person depends while another accepts this dependence. This correspondence between *amaeru* (to depend) and *amaesaseru* (to be dependable) is not necessarily spoiling. It can and must be valued as such, as Doi (1973: 18) discovers in his clinical case of a young female patient, whose mother reported that, during her childhood, "she did not "amaeru" much".[5]

The above description of *amae* confirms the necessary combination of its psychological and social aspects. Additionally, the word possesses a "moral character" (cf. Doi 1973: 23), which is also recognizable in the English translation, particularly in the verb allow. All these different qualities are, to emphasize it once more, considered by the *amae* mentality in relation to other persons, rather than to things or activities. The question then arises of whether one *can*, *may*, *should*, or *must* be dependent on *whom* in a specific social context. One can allow oneself (*amaeru*) or others (*amaesaseru*) to depend. One can also passively be depended upon (*amaerareru*). In this way, the *amae* mentality transforms intersubjectivity into interdependency. As Nakamura pointed out, Japan's agrarian history fostered insular communities where the notion of an independent individual became a true *contradictio in adjecto*. Consequently, *amae* signifies not only a particular kind of behavior but also a parameter for assessing personality. A recent study (Kobayashi & Kato 2015) attempts to classify personality into four types, following the work of Kim Bartholomew & Leonard M. Herowitz (1991), in terms of positive and negative evaluation of *amae*, either granted to the self (*allowing oneself the pleasure*) or shared with others (*allowing or trusting someone else to have the pleasure with oneself*). The goal of this *Amae-Type Scale* (ATS) is to assess an individual's type and degree of dependency needs in order to evaluate psychological disturbances or distress, which could arise from falling into the cracks of this close-knit web of interdependency.

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4   A similar expression, *amayakasu*, must be distinguished from *amaesaseru* because the former is already a normative expression, which means to indulge someone in a negative sense.

5   In Japanese: kono ko wa amari amaemasen deshita. To note is that this mother is an English lady born in Japan and changes her language from English to Japanese only to express the quoted sentence.

State of Nature as Interdependency Among Humans and Objects

The first case study of *amae* centers on its primitive stages in a family and its relationship to nature. A child's dependence on its parents is, as attachment theory shows, essential for the survival. However, the clinical case that Doi (1973: 18) explores involving a girl who did not exhibit *amae* in her childhood indicates that material security alone does not define this desire (cf. Kobayashi & Kato 2015: 106). It is the "tender emotion" (Doi 1973: 20) of an infant towards its mother, that fundamentally supports *amae*. Even when a child is well cared for materially, the absence of emotional dependence can lead to psychological problems. Nevertheless, this issue of the child is simultaneously that of the parent. A child is expected to form an attachment to their mother, while she, in turn, needs this bond with her child to fulfill her need to nurture. At the same time, dependency should not be excessive, lest it spoils its members. A child needs care but must outgrow its infantile indulgence, while parents are advised against being overprotective. To illustrate, the Chinese character for man (人) can be viewed (although etymologically not defined) as two people (arches) leaning on one another to stay upright. If one leans too much or too less, this mutual dependency collapses. According to this logic of *amae*, there is support provided by others and no private, isolated person: "In Japan, little value is attributed to the individual's private realm as distinct from the group" (Doi 1973: 40). Consequently, a self is first realized within family ties.

If an infantile attachment to maternal love serves as the paradigm of *amae*, its metaphorical application to *mother nature* is not far-fetched. Doi (1973: 76f) conceives *amae* as a capacity to "generate, mainly by emotional means, a sense of identity with one's surroundings" and quotes a well-known Zen Buddhist scholar, Daisetsu T. Suzuki, regarding "the Oriental nature" as a mother with her unconditional love, in contrast to the paternal dominance over nature found in Western culture. Furthermore, Doi (ibid.: 150) compares modern "human alienation" from life due to technology with the situation in which "the infant is left by its mother". As in the case of *monono aware* (see above), if *amae* is understood in its broadest sense, the Japanese mind is drawn towards certain energy sources, which can be both material and personal, in the same way that iron filings are attracted to a magnet. In this regard, another notion form Eastern tradition becomes relevant. The Chinese Neo-Confucian school initiated by Zhu Xi, according to Joseph Needham (2005: 472), explains the universe through two concepts, namely, the *matter-energy of chii* (qi, 氣) and the organizing

principle of *li* (理).[6] The former represents vapor-like life energy similar to spiritus, that permeates all matters of the cosmos and holds them together. The Japanese counterpart, *ki* (気), is recognized by both Doi (1973: 95–100) and Kimura (1972) as a key concept which underpins the interrelatedness of all elements in the world, in which humans find themselves. Kimura (ibid.: 233) even claims that emotions are motions of nature absorbed by and in a human. Whereas *amae* is rarely projected onto natural objects in everyday Japanese (other than animals), its *primitive* feeling can be rephrased as "natural",[7] meaning that it is innate and applicable to any experience, whether with humans or objects.

Social Collectivism According to Family-Like Dependency

While different types of relationships demand specific qualities, as claimed by Mencius, the principal aspect of dependence remains the same, which Doi attempts to conceptualize with *amae*. He shows that the Japanese term for public, *ōyake*, was originally introduced to mean the Imperial Family, the then-strongest faction in Japan (Doi 1973: 43f). Although Meiji-era Japan emulated the constitutional governance of Europe, the Imperial Family needed to be mobilized to "help in binding the nation spiritually" (ibid.: 59). During this period, "the stress upon the duty of repaying one's "on" [spiritual debts: T.S.] to the Emperor and to one's parents served the purpose of regulating the all too powerful desire of "amae"" (Doi 1962: 5). In Postwar Japan, Doi continues (ibid.), the desire for *amae* was systematically extinguished, leading to chaos and psychological disorders among the Japanese. The existence of the Imperial Family acts as an emotional safeguard, much like mothers do for small children. For this reason, despotism does not fully explain the situation. While the wartime Japanese government manipulated the royal sentiments of citizens to drive the entire nation into a desperate battle, the important point is that *amae* relationships are always reciprocal. Even if an emperor holds the highest rank, he is still seen

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6   This latter, rather metaphysical concept of "li" is a complicated issue (cf. ibid.: 472–485) and is not further discussed here.

7   Cf. Doi (1973: 37): "it is the most natural thing in the world for *amae* to exist in the parent-child relationship, while other cases where *amae* comes into play would all seem to be either quasi-parental relationships or relationships in which there is some element of this basic relationship".

as dependent on his subjects.[8] He is the father of the nation and must feel or answer these dependency needs to exert his power as one of descendants of Japanese deities.

The German philosopher Karl Löwith (2022: 549), who taught in Japan for many years during the early stages of World War II, describes this unique type of patriotism as follows: "In a certain sense Japanese nationalism is much more natural and substantial, total and existential than that of the totalitarian states, for it is integrated with the social system as based in the ancestor cult of the family system and thereby with the National Religion, Shinto". Aligned with this, Watsuji (1996) develops his ethics around the concept of *ningen*, or *man in betweenness*, starting from marriage and successively encompassing family, relatives, village, local and commercial community, and nation (public). At each step, the previous relationship is bracketed to enter the next one. In this way, communities of different layers grow into a nation family (*kokka*). The Second World War, in retrospect, can be interpreted as a striking expression and affirmation of the psychological construct of *amae* in Japan — underscoring the nation's inclination toward relational dependency and implicit trust in authority. We should not overlook a devastating consequence inherent in such a family nationalism, even though moral judgments about specific activities and outcomes lie beyond the scope of the *amae* concept. Accordingly, Historian Saburō Ienaga (1979) criticizes Japanese imperialism and militarism during the Second World War for disregarding human dignity and rights, arguing that political ideology blindly elevated duty to the nation, military units, and family above the value of individual life.

Mutual Dependency in Educational Settings

Assuming Doi's theory is interpreted as a comprehensive account of psychological, social, and ethical patterns typical of Japanese behavior, the ensuing example offers a concrete illustration of its application. According to a study on Covid-19 pandemic governance (Kampe et al. 2021), Japanese youth hold that countermeasures were implemented less stringently than culturally expected or personally wished. The Japanese government did not enforce Corona policies through

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8   Cf. Doi (1973: 58): "The emperor is in a position to expect that those about him will attend to all matters great and small, including, of course, the government of the country. In one sense he is entirely dependent on those about him, yet status-wise it is those about him who are subordinate to the emperor".

laws but simply announced as recommendations or, more precisely, as *duties to put in effort* (*doryoku gimu*). Instead of disparaging this non-legal methodology, the survey indicates that Japanese individuals expect others to thoroughly implement unwritten rules in return for abiding by them themselves. Wearing a facemask, therefore, means not only protecting oneself or others in terms of health but also, and perhaps to a greater degree, signalizing respect for fellow citizens by following social codes. Mutual dependency serves as a starting point in Japanese society rather than an end goal to be achieved. Since no one is born with this particular disposition — respect is not innate — it must be inculcated in the Japanese education system. Johnson (1992: 146) highlights a uniquely Japanese method of building small activity groups called *kumi* in elementary schools:

> "The strong "amae" relationship established with the mother [...] is both split and modified in the school situation. [...] As in the family, socialization pressures operate to convert individual (personal) narcissism into a collective pride achieved through group identification. This diffused pride is associated with the "kumi," the whole class, and for that matter the entire school — preparing the young citizen for collective identifications later in life".

The *kumi* structure in Japanese elementary schools systematically curtails opportunities for individual decision-making, fostering collective identities over personal autonomy. As Nakamura has illustrated through Japan's agrarian tradition, this group orientation reflects deeply rooted social patterns. Unlike the more Western ideal of independence, Japanese students are encouraged to depend on one another. This inclination toward interdependence resonates with Kimura's concept of *between*, wherein the self is perceived as embedded within relationships rather than as an isolated entity. Another study (Hayashi et al. 2009) sheds light on *amae* socialization in a preschool setting, where a child's loneliness (*samishisa*) is attentively monitored by teachers and compensated by nurturing feelings of mutual care (*omoiyari*) among children to satisfy dependency needs. According to a recent investigation (Niiya 2017), Japanese young adults (entrepreneurs and managers, mostly male) deliberately and proactively express *amae*-like needs to gain recognition from others and facilitate their future relationships of mutual support.

An educationally relevant phenomenon that also reveals the *amae* mentality of the Japanese is the phenomenon of *hikikomori* (to withdraw and barricade in one's own room). A recent study by Kato et al. (2019: 433) interprets the pathological symptoms of *hikikomori*

— a condition marked by extreme social withdrawal — through the lens of *amae*. Individuals who isolate themselves often rely heavily on caregivers for basic needs, revealing a form of dependent trust. Without this support, their self-imposed isolation would quickly collapse under the pressure of unmet physical necessities such as hunger and thirst. Simply put, those who put voluntarily confine themselves indulge in a staged solitary life. However, the essence of *amae* is misunderstood when one considers only the material aspects of *hikikomori*. On one hand, *hikikomori* patients are overdependent on the material provisions they receive (exhibiting excessive *amae*). On the other hand, *hikikomori* often loose meaningful social connections rooted in trust, care, and reciprocity. Their dependence is typically limited to caregivers, reflecting a deep isolation from broader social relationships. This withdrawal mirrors a lack or void of dependable social relationships (indicating insufficient emotional *amae*), which might be compensated by frantic use of social networks. In either case, complete autonomy or self-regulation becomes a burden in the face of the *amae* principle of Japanese society. Reflecting on online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic, Japanese high school students expressed their dissatisfaction with being unable to converse with their teachers and peers, as well as with giving up extracurricular activities such as sports and excursions (Sakata 2025). While Japanese education, like that in other modern states influenced by Western culture, conveys universalized, scientific knowledge, its social foundation is neither a Kantian call to *sapere aude* to promote moral autonomy nor Swedish *trygghet* to claim independency from others. Rather, it aims to encourage mutual dependency among individuals.

Résumé

There appears to be a subtle yet meaningful connection between Swedish *trygghet* and Japanese *amae*: the cultivation of humanity through emotional safety and the delicate orchestration of social harmony. While *trygghet* seems to be sustained through egalitarian principles, nurturing both a collective sense of security and the aspiration for personal autonomy, *amae* appears woven into interdependent, often hierarchical social relationships, where emotional reliance is both expected and culturally embedded. A gentle, nurturing kindness appears to be the shared foundation underlying both concepts, functioning not only as an individual moral ideal but as a socially institutionalized norm and structural ethos, and a claimable safeguard against social exclusion. At the same time, both *trygghet* and *amae* seem to

transcend linguistic boundaries, embodying the paradox of reconciling autonomy with intimacy, and freedom with belonging — a tension that defies articulation. Cultivated with care, *trygghet* and *amae* deepen social bonds; imposed or manipulated, they distort into control and repression.

Although both autonomy and dependency are widely acknowledged as fundamental to human development and pedagogy, the persistent tension between these poles remains one of the most profound and enduring challenges in educational theory and practice. This is poignantly exemplified by the phenomenon of *hikikomori*, which draws attention to the vulnerabilities exposed by imbalance in interpersonal bonds. In this context, radical autonomy does not emerge as a beneficial consequence of deep safety, but rather as an emotional isolation from social interaction, manifesting in the void of counterbalancing intimacy that meaningful interpersonal connections provide. Social withdrawal in *hikikomori* can be seen as reflecting the psychological strain that arises within a society where the simultaneous demands for individual identity formation and intersubjective conformity create tensions — particularly during the vulnerable phase of adolescence. Under these conditions, what appears as personal firmness can function as a performative shield, obscuring dominance, discouraging critical voices, and repackaging control as cooperative effort. *Hikikomori* reflects that kindness, when ritualized into an obligatory social script, may conceal emotional turmoil and subtly veil acts of interpersonal harm. Thus, enforced emotional closeness and avoidance of confrontation may paradoxically fuel the very alienation that the social script aims to prevent. Within the Swedish context, *trygghet* can carry undertones of paternalistic government control and bureaucratic detachment, suggesting that the pursuit of security may, at times, take the form of withdrawal rather than engagement.

Conclusion and Outlook

To integrate *trygghet* and *amae* pedagogically — and thereby tutorially — we must examine practices rooted in these concepts. Social *trygghet* is intricately connected to the Swedish welfare state, characterized by strong government guidance such as civic transparency, targeted anti-bullying initiatives in schools and institutions, and robust safeguards for individual wellbeing. It invites a permissive embrace of personal vulnerability — not in dependent terms but as a chosen gesture of peace and ethical wisdom. Interpersonal kindness, then, becomes a medium for inclusivity and resistance — an expression of

interpersonal freedom that transcends emotional dependency and challenges asymmetric power relations.

In her 2008 study *The Desirable Child: Upbringing Expressed in Everyday Communicative Acts Between Teachers and Children in Preschool*, Anette Emilson highlights emotional presence in teaching by referencing *trygghet*, stressing its role in fostering secure and responsive learning environments:

> "Communicative regulation appeared to enhance the children's ability to exert influence. Educators maintained authority by adopting the child's perspective, employing a playful voice, demonstrating emotional presence, and offering responsive interaction. Rules became largely implicit, and explicit verbal reprimands were notably absent. A key finding of this study was that robust teacher control does not inherently curtail children's influence" (Emilson 2008: 79).

Trygghet in education is here seen as essential for cognitive engagement and emotional openness, cultivating spaces where individuals can explore their inner nature, act authentically, and connect empathetically.

In Japan, bullying, or *ijime*, is a long-standing issue in schools and even at workplaces, closely related to the dependency needs of *amae*. Victims of bullying experience a strong sense of exclusion, akin to the case of *hikikomori*. A qualitative study on this topic describes the main cause as follows:

> "An increasing number of students who refuse to come to school may be explained by their being denied, as a result of "Ijime" victimization, an existence in school, where they strongly depend on peer groups to construct their own identity at this developmental stage of their lives" (Akiba 2005: 223).

For this reason, the role of teachers is to make children aware of the dangers inherent in intimate emotional attachments, which always exhibit an excluding nature, in order to render justice to those who are discriminated against in the process.

An important implication of this, in relation to the above observation in the Swedish context, is that an educator's emotional framework can serve as a strong model to reduce bullying — rather than explicitly addressing concepts like justice and fairness. Growing up in Japan, one often hears teachers say *kawaisō* in respect of *ijime* victims, which translates to pitiful. Ronald McLaren (1984) demonstrated decades ago that this term can be understood as indicative of unfairness felt by

peers (in his study, among American students) or as pitiful compassion expressed by those in authority (for example, teachers in Japanese contexts). He emphasizes human interdependencies of Japanese ancestor cult and explains that a *kawaisō* (pitiful) situation must be acknowledged by higher authorities. This recognition, even without intervening directly in conflicts, provides comfort to victims (ibid.: 60). A solution to *ijime* lies analogously in the teacher's authoritative or representative *feeling of pity*, which both bullies and bystanders must sympathize with to empathize with victims. As seen in the mechanism of *amae*, mothers, rulers, and teachers must be dependable for those who need dependencies.

In conclusion, our analysis suggests that the concepts of *trygghet* and *amae* reflect culturally distinct forms of emotional assurance — each implying that support and closeness are inherently available, rather than contingent upon individual merit. A comparative examination of *trygghet* and *amae* in educational contexts reveals a shared tendency in both Sweden and Japan to position teachers and schools as central providers of emotional care — serving as institutional anchors of psychological support for students. However, the relational dynamics among students reveal notable cultural divergences. In Sweden, *trygghet* appears to be sustained primarily through personal relationships that symbolically embody the presence of the state. We can observe that this sense of security, friendliness, and coziness does not necessarily stem from social interdependence, but may instead be rooted in institutional assurances of care, respect, and equality. Professional educator–child interactions are subsequently characterized by emotional attunement, playful engagement, and responsive communication — qualities that shall reinforce the child's right to feel safe and valued. Conversely, in the Japanese educational context, *amae* appears to be facilitated through tightly knit peer groups, where emotional dependencies are nurtured within intimate social units. *Amae* is not primarily rooted in the notion of freely associating individuals, as familial and communal groups — such as parents, relatives, and local communities — exist prior to one's conscious recognition of belonging. While detachment from these ties is possible, such renunciations often disrupt the healthy development of emotional life and, in extreme cases, may contribute to conditions like *hikikomori*.

This study conceptualizes *trygghet* and *amae* as foundational patterns within pedagogical theory and practice, framed through comparative encyclopedic approaches to education. It establishes a conceptual groundwork for more nuanced and context-sensitive empirical research by inviting deeper investigation into how these concepts function in educational settings and respond to concrete challenges.

These insights are especially relevant for future research into classroom dynamics, student well-being, and the development of pedagogical strategies across diverse cultural-linguistic contexts.

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