Developing in a Dynamic World

Harnessing Psychology to Support the COVID-19 Generation

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Abstract: In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and other social dynamics created a myriad of challenges and changes for individuals, groups, and societies. The impacts on youth are particularly noteworthy given developmental processes of adolescence and emerging adulthood. As psychologists, we have much to offer in studying how 2020 influenced their development and in shaping effective supports. To be useful, the work must be nuanced, iterative, and attentive to their lived realities. We argue for a dynamic research framework to study these developmental processes. Through such an approach, psychological science can provide insight into diverse young people's experiences of COVID-19 with a focus on addressing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3, 4, and 16 on increasing a sense of well-being, making education more equitable, and developing more peaceful societies. This paper lays out three theoretical frameworks – Synthetic, Augmentative, Generative, and Experiential, Meanings, Observations, Viewpoints, and Experiences, and the Developmental Peacebuilding Model – that can be used to capture the dynamism of meaning-making and development within changing contexts. We then provide examples from our research with young people in the United States and Ireland. This paper ends with a call for psychologists across the globe to understand and address COVID-19's impacts on youth through iterative and integrative research methods with a focus on meaning-making. In coordination with macro-level metrics, such work can help understand lived psychosocial impacts on diverse groups of young people, while highlighting opportunities to support SDGs 3, 4, and 16.

Keywords: COVID-19, meaning-making, adolescent development, the United States, Ireland

Impact and Implications. Building peaceful, inclusive societies with equitable educational opportunities requires attention to how young people process, make sense, respond to, and shape what is going on around them. The events of 2020 – the pandemic, racial injustice, and financial and health crises – have impacted the lives of youth during a critical time in their development that will influence how they engage with their communities, as well as their well-being, educational trajectories, and orientations toward peace. In this paper, we describe how dynamic and iterative research on interpretation and meaning can provide insights into how young people are experiencing and responding to these events, with implications for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2020, individuals and societies faced many challenges: systemic racism and structural inequities, political polarization, economic troubles, and a global public health crisis. People across all ages were impacted. Youth, however, faced unique stressors associated with developmental processes of adolescence and emerging adulthood. Their social, educational, and familial lives were disrupted, with implications for identity development, future trajectories, and mental health (e.g., Gloster et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). These impacts will inevitably shape youths' developmental trajectories, especially considering the formational nature of social interaction and identity processes during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2014).

As psychologists, we have much to offer in studying how COVID-19 and concurrent issues influence young people's development. Still, this research must be nuanced and process-oriented; that is, it must not simply approach these

issues as discrete events with static outcomes on young people's lives (Power & Velez, 2020). Attention to their dynamic lived realities can provide ecologically valid insights about how this time influenced their development, as well as applicable insights to bolster effective, holistic supports for their well-being, mental, and physical health.

In this paper, we argue for using dynamic research framework to study development during and beyond the pandemic. We present multiple models for how psychological science can be used to provide insight into diverse young people's meaning-making occurring amid the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how this work is necessary to address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3, 4, and 16. These goals specifically entail "ensur[ing] health lives and promot[ing] well-being for all at all ages" (SDG 3), "ensur[ing] inclusive and equitable quality education and promot[ing] lifelong learning opportunities for all" (SDG 4), and "promot[ing]

peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provid[ing] access to justice for all and build[ing] effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" (SDG 16).

Our purpose is to provide frameworks for addressing critical needs related to the SDGs and the current sociohistorical moment. First, we articulate the need for multiple methods used in iterative and synthetic research agendas to capture young people's meaning-making processes. Specifically, we discuss three approaches that are particularly useful in the context of the pandemic: the Synthetic, Augmentative, Generative, and Experiential (SAGE) model of social psychology research (Power et al., 2018), the Meanings, Observations, Viewpoints, and Experiences (MOVE) framework (Power & Velez, 2020), and the Developmental Peacebuilding Model (DPM; Taylor, 2020). The first two provide methodological guidelines researchers can follow, while the third offers a developmental model that can be applied concretely to questions related to peace, psychosocial development, and the pandemic. These frameworks offer concrete opportunities to attune to young people's experiences of well-being and education amid the myriad challenges, as well as the impacts on identity development in relation to peace. Consistent with achieving the SDGs, we note that peace can be advanced even in established democracies. We then offer examples on our research with children, adolescents, and young adults in the United States and Ireland. Finally, we end with a call for psychological science to incorporate similar dynamic frameworks to research to support young people's holistic flourishing during a time of challenge.

COVID-19, Youth, and Psychological Models in a Pandemic World

The events of 2020 differentially affected communities and individuals across the world, and young people were systematically impacted. Changes occurred across the socioecological systems in which young people are embedded: societal norms (e.g., masking), institutions (e.g., overburdened health systems), everyday lives, and intimate social spheres (e.g., schools and the health of their family). Importantly, the impacts were *differential*, deeply connected to systemic and structural inequality, and *dynamic*, unfolding over time as these young people develop (Araújo et al., 2021). In many contexts, the pandemic deepened challenges to the full realization of the rights of minors. Exacerbating the inequities and needs that existed pre-COVID-19, the interwoven crises of 2020 fed into

increasing rates of poverty, extreme disruptions in learning and development, and pronounced violence and abuse of youth (UNICEF, 2020; Whiting, 2020). These challenges are directly tied to the focus in the SDGs on holistic fulfillment of children and adolescents' potential through conditions and services related to well-being (SDG 3), inclusive and robust educational systems (SDG 4), and peaceful and just societies (SDG 16). Furthermore, the reverberations of this time do not end with vaccines or as time passes. Given the developmental tasks and processes during childhood and adolescence, the ways that young people experienced and responded to 2020 will be a part of their identities and selves as they grow and mature into adult citizens. It will mark an entire generation. Already, there is evidence of increased mental health needs for youth across the world (e.g., Gloster et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). In some cases, such as in the United States and Colombia, there has also been increased violence tied to youth action on issues exacerbated by COVID-19 (Rubiano, 2021).

Holistic frameworks are needed to tackle the complexity of COVID-19 and the nuance involved in how young people experience the disruptions and changes in their lives. One example of the developmental consequences of a significant societal crisis is "Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experiences" (Elder, 1974). In this longitudinal research, Elder followed a cohort of 167 individuals – including participants from working-class and middle-class families – from their primary schools in Oakland California during the 1930s into the 1960s. Overall, this work demonstrated how such experiences, the meaning made from them, and the responses to them shaped developmental trajectories in relation to well-being, education, and identity. During the depression, deprivation manifested in strong gendered roles. Girls became more involved in household tasks, and mothers gained power in marital relations. In contrast, boys often secured part-time paid employment. In the longer term, effort in the workplace compensated for educational disadvantages for those men who had been deprived as boys. Both men and women from deprived backgrounds during the *depression* valued family and stability later in life. Such insights are critical to understanding the psychological underpinnings for why individuals marked by the *great depression* might engage in peace (e.g., interpersonally in the family) or how values emerging from these experiences align with broader definitions of well-being (such as outlined in the SDGs). Elder's seminal study (1974) illustrates the importance of dynamic, integrated methods, used over time, to comprehend how young people make meaning of experiences in localized contexts.

In line with this example, we have previously argued that studying experiences, meaning-making, and development

processes during times of crisis or rupture requires nuanced, iterative, and dynamic approaches. First, the first and third authors outlined the SAGE model of social psychology research (Power et al., 2018). The acronym encapsulates our proposal to have a *synthetic* approach to using mixed methods, where qualitative methods can be used to *augment* findings from quantitative studies, and to *generate* new hypotheses and predictions capable of advancing psychological knowledge. We suggested qualitative methods can be used independently of quantitative approaches to study *experiences* that evade experimental reductionism. Second, we built upon this integrative framework to research by centering the importance of examining MOVE, as they unfold, in context, over time (Power & Velez, 2020). Complementing these models, the second author has proposed the DPM (Taylor, 2020), which integrates a social ecological approach and peacebuilding paradigm to emphasize youth's agency and the multiple constructive ways they are changing their social contexts. SAGE, MOVE, and DPM are complementary: DPM brings nuanced developmental perspective to the question of how to understand young people's experience of educational systems, well-being amid crises, and engagement with the construction of peaceful societies, while the SAGE and MOVE frameworks can guide integrative, holistic research agendas to better understand this phenomenon.

As individuals and societies grapple to make sense of the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, these models offer concrete and applicable frameworks to examine experiences and meaning-making processes, as well as the ways that young people are actively engaging in the response to adversity. That is, these models help to understand the dynamic interplay as youth imagine and ultimately shape the multiple new realities which the pandemic creates. Young people's experiences, interpretations, and responses to the pandemic will have deep impacts on their developmental trajectories (Gubrium & Gubrium, 2021; Velez et al., in press), including with reverberations for how they engage or disengage with both positive and negative violence and peace.

All methods reveal and conceal. An application of the SAGE model can increase the scope of methodological approaches for understanding the impact COVID-19 has on achieving the social development goals concerning well-being, education, and peace (Power et al., 2018). Moreover, previous research highlights the importance of temporality in comprehending the effects of societal crises (e.g., Elder, 1974; Grob et al., 2001). As such, the MOVE framework offers conceptual scaffolding from which to build innovative, multiple-method, research projects focused on both documenting and also achieving well-being, and maintaining educational levels and peace during and after the pandemic (Power & Velez, 2020). Finally, the DPM explicitly teases out how children and youth can not only help those around them but also work toward more just, structural change (Taylor, 2020). Together, they offer an opportunity for better understanding how COVID-19 has impacted the lives of young people, with a particular eye toward well-being, education, and peace (i.e., as related to SDGs 3, 4, and 16). These temporal, integrative, dynamic, and agentic frameworks are especially critical for understanding youth meaning-making and developmental processes and how these, in turn, shape experiences of the pandemic and other social dynamics in 2020. MOVE provides a guide for where to focus research questions, and SAGE provides a conceptual framework for how to choose and integrate methods to address these questions, while DPM offers a developmental model that is salient for questions of peace and well-being in relation to youth experience and meaning-making.

Integrative Research, Young People's Meaning-Making, and COVID-19

Moving from the theoretical to the applied can be a challenge. In this section, we provide two examples of psychological research projects focused on young people's meaning-making, integrating dynamic, integrative, and iterative methods, and supporting the construction of cultures of peace. The empirical work is explained in depth in other articles (including important cultural contexts and elaborated methods). Here, we summarize them and offer details that demonstrate how iterative, integrative research agendas – in line with SAGE, MOVE, and the DPM – can be leveraged to support youth's well-being, education, and peace within the context of COVID-19.

What the Pandemic Means for Them: US Adolescents' Experiences

A first example comes from one of the authors' investigation of US adolescents' experiences of the pandemic and coping with its multifaceted challenges. A multistep, multimethod process was used to gather their perspectives, while also focusing analysis and dissemination on their well-being and education. Surveys were conducted with adolescents when widespread quarantines began in March 2020 ($N = 816$) and then again after the start of the next academic year in October 2020 ($N = 2,148$). A small group ($N = 18$) participated in both and then were

interviewed (Velez et al., in press). Additionally, guardians of the adolescents from the longitudinal group were also invited to be interviewed to add their perspective on how their child had been experiencing the pandemic. Questions addressed general experiences, as well as specific prompt that focused on schooling, challenges, and emotions. Separately, we administered surveys to guardians (N = 336) to ask their perspectives on their children's psychosocial well-being (Nemanich et al., under review). The various data sources and approaches allowed us to build a nascent understanding of different ways that young people have been impacted, while also forming the foundation for exploring how they are coping with and responding as part of their development. Importantly, the longitudinal group will be interviewed at various points in the future to continue to build this understanding.

Several key themes have emerged in triangulating the various data, with implications for well-being and educational equity (core elements of SDGs 3 and 4). Many participants described struggling to be motivated, to maintain focus on schoolwork, and to cope with stress. These young people were involved in few extracurriculars, used screens and social media more often, and experienced new and increased stressors related to school. The isolation of quarantines, remote schooling, and COVID-19 life generally – whether imposed from the outside or as a choice to protect themselves and loved ones – weighed on their psychosocial well-being. The range of mental health concerns varied, although many of the responses in surveys and interviews indicated that young people's negative mood symptoms of loneliness and restlessness increased. Some adolescents detailed extreme boredom, while others described feeling exhausted and immersed in despair. The latter included those who expressed frustration with the new normal in their lives and others who had difficulty coping with sorrow and challenges (societal or personal) during this time. School experiences often exacerbated these struggles; many expressed in the surveys that teachers and schools were not attentive to difficulties of online/hybrid learning or the stresses and demands students faced during the pandemic.

Building on this interrelation of school experiences and well-being, our findings also demonstrated the experience of some structural and systemic inequities tied to SDGs 3 and 4 laid bare by the pandemic and other events of 2020. For example, in comparison to other participants, Latinx students more often expressed mental health concerns in relation to their school experiences and described impacts on their families' health and financial state as significant stressors. In the fall survey, almost half of Latino/a respondents (45%) described their experience of school as negative.

While the reverberations of 2020 are still being processed, this multipronged research project demonstrates the need for nuanced approaches to studying young people's meaning-making. The impact of 2020 on youth cannot be encapsulated by static measures – as is often the case, for example, with achievement gap and mental health needs – but must focus on understanding and targeting their coping and responses. Meaning-making and development is a critical intersection for considering the SDG's focus on well-being and educational inequity. For example, how does a sense of missing out and its possible emotional impacts fit into usual frameworks on trauma and depression? The dynamic nature of the multitude of challenges in 2020 and their developmental impacts require more flexible, integrative approaches. As the pandemic stretches into 2022, institutions, such as schools, must foster protective factors and places of connection to foster healthy lives and well-being (SDG 3) and work toward more robust educational outcomes (SDG 4).

Young Adults Take Action: Prosocial Responses to COVID-19 in Ireland

A dynamic approach to understanding COVID-19's relation to SDGs and youth can also be considered as a call to action. The findings reported here are part of a global effort to document how young adults were responding in cooperative and prosocial ways (Padilla-Walker et al., in press; de Moor et al., 2022), consistent with the DPM. In Ireland, over 907 participants responded, ranging in age from 18 to 30 years (M = 21.7, SD = 2.2), to an online survey in spring 2020. Consistent with SAGE and MOVE, qualitative findings here augment the meaning of youth experiences and viewpoints beyond the published quantitative findings. After completing a set of items about how often they engaged in helping family, friends, or strangers, such as being *kind*, doing *small favors*, or *cheer up* others (Carlo & Randall, 2002), participants could provide examples or elaborate qualitatively. Consistent with the DPM, these responses also highlight the different *types* (i.e., helping or peaceful protest) and *targets* (i.e., close loved ones or strangers that youth may never meet) of prosociality (Taylor, 2020). Here, we present these young adults' open-ended responses, which point to the constructive ways young people are advancing well-being (SDG 3) and a peaceful society (SDG 16) even amid the pandemic.

Prosociality Toward Family
Over one-third of participants provided concrete examples of how they helped family members. Three primary themes included instrumental support, emotional support, and being kind or trying to decrease others' stress. First, instrumental support included doing shopping and running

errands, making food, and delivering meals, accompanying family to health visits, financial support, sending packages and gifts such as masks, and child minding. The responses also indicated that many young adults were still living at home with their parents: "I help my parents with cooking and cleaning and disinfecting anything that comes into the house to protect them as much as I can due to them being considered high risk…." Second, emotional forms of prosociality toward family included *just listening*, phone calls or video chats, setting up Zoom games, and going for walks. Third, participants named the *absence* of behavior as a prosocial tendency; for example, "Always bit my tongue when they annoyed me to avoid an argument since everyone is very stressed anyway." In this way, participants were aware of the overall levels of stress and not only actively tried to help but also demonstrated self-control and understanding of others' stress.

Helping Friends

Half of the young adult respondents to this survey provided examples of how they supported friends during the first months of the pandemic in Ireland. The vast majority included emotional support through increased communication: "talking" and "keeping in touch" were the most common. The timing of this survey also captured examples particular to Ireland, "Trying to talk them through the absolute mess that was the Leaving Cert [exam for University admission] and now the results. Trying to calm them down." Second, compared to family targets, there were more limited examples of instrumental support, such as "Taking them somewhere in my car, so they could avoid using public transport." Overall, these responses indicated young people were providing a sense of community and belonging to their peers.

Supporting Strangers

Over half of the respondents also shared concrete examples of helping strangers. More distal to these developing young adults, participants also shared how they were prosocially responding to those that they did not know. Three primary themes emerged: instrumental support through volunteering and/or professional work, kindness, and adhering to COVID-19 public health guidelines. First, many examples of instrumental support were similar for family and strangers. Those working in healthcare or shops also noted how they adjusted their work: "Working in customer service I tried to respect customers' boundaries around the time and provide them with extra help." Second, participants described showing politeness, patience, and kindness in terms of prosocial interactions with strangers. Third, this prompt also elicited more responses about how young adults were following national guidelines, such as "going out of my way to

give social distance" or "Stayed at home, worn [sic] a mask etc. for others safety and well-being." Unique to this category, a fourth theme emerged which demonstrated the cross-cutting nature of risk and inequality exacerbated by COVID-19. Young adults noted their prosocial support for strangers through social media comments, engagement, and material support for Black Lives Matter protests. This theme illuminates how young adults in Ireland connect both social and political forms of engagement (e.g., Taylor et al., 2018, 2019).

Framed by the DPM, studying the constructive and agentic responses of young people, in their own words, complements other recent research in Ireland on the impact of COVID-19 related to psychological stress (Burke et al., 2020), well-being (Stafford et al., in press), or young people's mental health (e.g., O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Beyond documenting the negative impact of the global pandemic, this approach highlights how young adults are taking individual and collective actions to help those around them and what it means to them. These findings demonstrate the need for studying development amid social flux as a time of changing resilience and meaning-making. This survey provides initial insights that can be developed and expanded through an integrative project involving further methods and research over time. From such a knowledge base, interventions that resonate with their experiences and identities can be developed to bolster their prosocial engagement related to their own well-being (SDG 3) and building peace in their immediate environments and the broader community (SDG 16).

Conclusion

In considering the intersection of human rights, equity, and young people, the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 presented new challenges while bringing to the forefront dynamics of a globalized, contemporary world. Unequal social systems, discrimination and marginalization, and violence are challenges we face as an international community. Scholars across disciplines have demonstrated how these dynamics particularly impact developing children and youth, such as through their engagement in conflict (e.g., Wessells, 2016), the long-lasting impacts of trauma (Felitti et al., 1998), and their adaptive coping responses and identity outcomes (Spencer, 2006). The socioecological systems that lay the groundwork for these dynamics are not static; social, political, and historical factors change. Sometimes these changes are gradual or relatively isolated to certain parts of life, and at other times, they are unstable and unpredictable and fundamentally

alter the society. The pandemic and other events of 2020 were the latter.

Amid this flux and its clear impacts of education, peace, and well-being across the world, it is especially critical that psychological research attends to meaning-making. The outcomes – such as greater impacts on health, mental health, and learning of children and youth from low resources communities – matter and are also worthy of study, but attending to the dynamic nature of how these individuals and groups are processing their experience highlights their coping and the emerging identities in response (Spencer, 2006). Drawing on the frameworks of dynamic models such as SAGE and MOVE, and the DPM that emphasizes youth agency, research that allows space for change and response can lay a groundwork for taking COVID-19 as a starting point to understand developmental trajectories through and beyond the pandemic. The two examples we highlight above are just beginning steps, but we present them to demonstrate how this attention to meaning and experience can illuminate what young people are going through, how they are responding and, in turn, shaping the world around them. In coordination with macro-level metrics (e.g., Townsend et al., 2020), such work can help understand the lived psychosocial impacts of diverse groups of young people and highlight opportunities to achieve SDGs 3, 4, and 16 by promoting well-being, more equitable education, and peaceful, inclusive societies. Of course, in applying such models across international settings, it is critical to be attentive to context. For the two empirical examples in this paper, this contextualization can be found in the full studies (see Velez et al., in press; Taylor et al., 2018, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic and other events of 2020 have demonstrated the immense gaps and obstacles to achieving these SDGs but have also demonstrated some of the opportunities and resilience of individuals and communities across the world. For psychologists whose research and work focuses on youth, centralizing their meaning-making offers an opportunity to develop ecologically valid understandings and interventions to foster their critical engagement with these challenges.

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