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Journal of Adolescent Research, Vol. 37, No. 3 (May 1, 2022): 439-465. [DOI](#). This article is © SAGE Publications and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). SAGE Publications does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from SAGE Publications.

Making Meaning of Peace: A Study of Adolescents in Bogota, Colombia

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Abstract

In post-conflict and transitional settings, adolescents are important civic and political actors as potential peacebuilders. Policy and programming often focus on promoting prosocial outcomes for these younger generations, but there has been growing attention to their perspectives and psychological development. Drawing on theory in developmental psychology, adolescents interpret and respond to context in forming ideas about key concepts like peace, understanding society and their place in it, and constructing their orientations toward peace. This study extends current literature by exploring how Colombian adolescents describe peace within the context of a peace process in their country. Ninety-six 15- to 18-year-olds in and around Bogotá, Colombia, were interviewed about peace. Their responses were analyzed inductively using an adapted thematic analysis. Findings indicated that the individual was central to how respondents talked about peace; that is, peace begins and depends on the internal states. From this basis, individuals then created peace through interpersonal relations. There were some differences by respondents' SES, such as in how respondents described peace as requiring equality in society, but none found for gender or age. This study demonstrates the

need to provide concrete opportunities for these adolescents to see individual contributions and broader interpersonal peace as possible.

Keywords

peace, meaning-making, identity, Colombia

In conflict, postconflict, and transitional settings, young people are important civic and political actors. They have the potential to be peace-builders (McEvoy-Levy, 2006), forces of change (Schwartz, 2010), or violent perpetrators (Urdal, 2006). Furthermore, their civic development has the potential to influence broader societal trajectories in relation to peace and conflict (see McGlynn et al., 2009). While there is often a focus on interventions and outcomes, a growing but underdeveloped area of research in these contexts explores the underlying mechanisms involved in young people's psychological and civic development (e.g., Hammack, 2010; Hart, 2008). This work focuses on the ways younger generations interpret and respond to events, programs, discourses, and socialization in their everyday contexts. These psychological processes include forming understandings of salient social, cultural, and civic concepts like peace, human rights, and citizenship, and the outcomes have both individual and collective implications (Hope & Spencer, 2017; Kroger, 2000; Rubin, 2007; Schwartz, 2010).

This study contributes to this literature by investigating how adolescents in and around Bogotá, Colombia, describe peace conceptually and situating this meaning-making within developmental psychology theory on meaning-making and identity. This approach situates adolescent identity development as a salient task involving agentic meaning-making based on discourses, experiences, and other elements in social contexts (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Spencer, 2006). Understanding how adolescents think about peace can contribute to more effective supports of active and engaged civic identity outcomes. These outcomes in turn can influence societal trajectories in relation to peace (e.g., Schwartz, 2010).

Colombia is an ideal setting to study how adolescents understand peace because of the recent sociopolitical context. Beginning in 2012, the government sought to end a long history of political and social violence by negotiating comprehensive peace accords with the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (the FARC-EP). This process also involved concerted efforts to promote civic and political participation of young Colombians; broadly, the government emphasized that young people should drive the construction of a peaceful Colombia (Sánchez Meertens, 2018; Velez et al., 2019).

Within this context, I interviewed 15- to 18-year olds ($n = 96$) about peace, the recent peace process, and other civic concepts. In this article, I detail findings from a thematic analysis investigating how participants described peace. This research is situated within an expansion of predominant approaches to young people's ideas about peace and engagement in peacebuilding through contextualization within adolescent identity development. Based on these findings, I then draw implications and connections to young people's identity development. The findings highlight how a developmental perspective on adolescents' meaning-making of peace could be used to bolster programming seeking to engage them in peacebuilding projects.

Peace, Meanings, and Psychosocial Development

Both as current civic actors and as future generations who are being socialized and actively forming identities, young people are pivotal to peacebuilding projects in conflict, transitional, and postconflict societies (McEvoy-Levy, 2006; Schwartz, 2010). Part of this dynamic involves how young people think about themselves, the groups they belong to, others in society, and the very notions of peace and conflict. Conceptually, peace and conflict are

social constructions, value laden, and contestable; they can encompass ideological beliefs, perspectives on national or international systems, understandings of interpersonal relations, and collective meaning-making processes (Sarrica, 2007; Van der Linden et al., 2011). Moving from conflict to peace in society not only necessitates ending violence but also changing meanings that are a part of the established political culture and may be passed intergenerationally to young people (Lederach, 1995; Lupu & Peisakhin, 2017).

Much of literature on this area about adolescents has explored the political socialization of attitudes and beliefs as violence and its motivators pass intergenerationally. Parents, peers, schools, and the media are key socialization agents of these norms and orientations. For example, in focus groups with Croatian adolescents, Reidy and colleagues (2015) found that these actors were critical influences for how participants thought about societal conflict and intergroup relations. On the whole, this research demonstrates that one driving force in intractable conflicts is the transmission of attitudes about social tension and groups as younger generations adopt systems of beliefs and emotions that sustain conflict (Bar-Tal et al., 2017).

Yet, young people are not just passively socialized, but rather active agents in forming understandings, attitudes, and identities. Their development involves interpreting and responding to socialization and dominant discourses (Hammack, 2010; Hope & Spencer, 2017). These processes are particularly salient during adolescence because individuals increasingly engage with broader systems and develop cognitive abilities to think more abstractly. These changes stimulate more defined ideas about societies, social positioning, and key civic concepts (Crocetti et al., 2012; Spencer, 2006; Velez & Spencer, 2018). In other words, adolescents form attitudes and identities based on a process of interpretation that involves contextual and personal factors, as well as lived experiences.

This process includes forming more developed and complex notions about peace and violence, with particular implications in conflict and transitional societies. Much of the theory on how young people come to form conceptual notions of peace, however, has primarily been situated in cognitive development. This framework focuses on how the content of thinking (e.g., understandings of peace) are related to brain development and related changes in the structure of thinking (e.g., perspective taking; see Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998). In a review of this work, Hakvoort and Oppenheimer (1998) found that developmentally appropriate concerns related to children and adolescents' definitions of peace. Young children (ages five to nine) talk about peace mostly as the absence of quarrels between friends or war between countries. From about 10 years old, children increasingly describe peace as involving interpersonal respect and tolerance, fitting with the salience of social development during this time. In line with emerging abstract reasoning abilities, older adolescents demonstrate more interdependent perspectives and draw on understandings of social conventions and systems (like democracy and human rights). Female adolescents more often describe peace as related to friendship or not quarreling, while males are more likely to mention the absence of armed conflict. These general trends hold in limited studies across geographic contexts (Oppenheimer, 2012).

Outside of this cognitive focus, some research has related adolescents' ideas about peace to ecological context. For example, a study with children in Northern Ireland and one with Israeli youth looked at changes based on significant political events related to conflict in each setting (a paramilitary ceasefire and the visit of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Israel; McLernon, Ferguson, & Cairns, 1997; Spielmann, 1986). This focus on specific events in society shifting young people's attitudes, however, does not integrate a developmental focus. Another, also limited, line of inquiry focuses on constructivist frameworks to developing ideas about peace, exploring how young people actively engage with or reject social discourses related to peace, and how factors like age, gender, and context relate to these (see Sarrica & Wachelke, 2010). This developmental approach centers on meaning-making; that is, how young people draw on social discourse and events in building their own understandings. All in all, the literature on young people's ideas about peace points toward the importance of political context and demographic factors (exposure to conflict, geography, and socioeconomic status) in adolescents' conceptions of

peace (e.g., Biton & Salomon, 2006; Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; McEvoy, 2000) but does not identify connections to broader identity development processes that are particularly salient during adolescence.

Theoretical Framework

I investigate Colombian adolescents' meaning-making processes within this context by drawing on developmental literature that frames identity formation as an active process of interpretation, response, and coping to ecological influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Spencer et al., 1997). Socialization and political, cultural, and social context are important, but not deterministic, in shaping how adolescents make meaning and form identities. Discourses, norms, and expectations are not passively internalized, but rather adolescents interpret them in relation to understandings of themselves and the supports and challenges in their lives (Martínez et al., 2012; Spencer, 2006). As part of this processing, how adolescents think about socially salient concepts are linked to their identities and how they act (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Spencer et al., 1997).

Young people's meaning-making in transitional settings is an important area of study because it is a critical part of their identity development and can produce transformational changes (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007). Adolescents may be more willing than adults to rethink prevalent discourses about conflict and citizenship (Bekerman, 2009). In addition, a key developmental task in adolescence is forming an identity and orientation toward one's society. This process can affect societal trajectories as young people engage and act as citizens, while also building lasting senses of who they are and what their roles are in their society (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015; Hope & Spencer, 2017; Schwartz, 2010; Spencer, 2006). Therefore, rich understandings of adolescent meaning-making in transitional and postconflict societies can inform peacebuilding policy and programming.

Colombian Context

Colombia is an ideal setting to study adolescent meaning-making of peace because of its history of conflict and recent sociopolitical context. The Colombian armed conflict has deep roots and involves a complicated web of motivating factors, geopolitical dynamics, and shifting actors. Over the last 50 years, it has touched the lives of almost all Colombian citizens: over 6 million have been displaced, more than 250,000 killed, and many more kidnapped, extorted, or forcibly recruited (Agencia de la Organización de Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados [ACNUR], 2017). In 2012, President Juan Manuel Santos began negotiations with the longest-standing and biggest guerrilla group, and 4 years of talks resulted in multifaceted and extensive peace accords (Pachon, 2017).

The peace process was marked by a concerted effort to promote broader political participation and ownership of building a more peaceful Colombia, particularly among youth (Posada-Carbó, 2017). Government policies, programs, and discourses positioned youth as critical to creating a different future. In this vein, the government passed Ley 1732 in 2015 mandating that all primary, secondary, and postsecondary schools include at least two of 12 broad, peace-related themes in their curricula (Chaux & Velásquez, 2016). This effort was a part of broader government discourse placing responsibility for peace on young people. Through speeches, documents, and programming, Santos and his government linked a peaceful future in Colombia to young people identifying and acting as peacebuilders in their social contexts (Sánchez Meertens, 2018; Velez et al., 2019). Exemplifying these discourses, when Santos signed Ley 1732, he stated,

we should turn our schools into places that support social harmony, camaraderie, and begin building peace with our children and youth because they are the future. . . This peace is not being negotiated in La Havana, but rather should begin in the interior of each of you in their everyday lives. (Ministerio de Educación, 2015)

Within this sociopolitical context, there were few investigations of how young Colombians were thinking about peace. In this study, I investigate ideas about peace among a sample of Colombian adolescents. Only a few studies have explored how adolescent Colombians think about peace, though others have investigated related topics like moral development in relation to peacebuilding (Posada & Wainryb, 2008) or adults' interpretations of sustainable peace (Taylor, Nilsson, & Amezquita-Castro, 2016). In one of the few related examples, prior to the peace process with the FARC-EP, Sacipa and colleagues (2006) interviewed participants from eight community organizations about their understandings of peace. For youth participants, meaning about peace was multifaceted and related to personal and social well-being. Across the whole sample, peace was defined as reconciliation and forgiveness at different levels, including in the community, family, social organizations, institutions, and national politics. Finally, peace also entailed order in society, based on tolerance, respect for difference, and constructive dialogue. A second study in Colombia on this topic took place only at the very beginning of the peace process. In this work, Berents (2018) employed ethnographic methods to investigate understandings and manifestations of peace for youth in a low-resource area just outside of Bogotá. She identifies seven themes in their understandings of peace, which tended to emphasize social justice and structural focuses, the need for a basic negative peace (that is, the absence of armed actors and violence between them), and collective responsibility for building a peaceful society. Ultimately, Berents argues that adolescent meaning-making matters as they developed embodied notions of everyday peace in response to the violence in their lives.

This study builds on the work of Sacipa and colleagues (2006) and Berents (2018) using a developmental lens to explore how adolescent Colombians made meaning of peace in 2016 toward the end of the peace process. I present this study as an initial approach to understanding what adolescent Colombians thought was necessary for, and how to build, cultures of peace, as well as situating the meaning of making of peace as an important element in considering how to promote adolescent engagement in peacebuilding and the development of peaceful self-identities. This study contributes to current literature by focusing on the transitional context of the most recent peace process in Colombia and extending the developmental psychological approach outlined by Hakvoort and Oppenheimer (1998).

Research Questions

The Colombian adolescents in this study are understood as processing and responding to influences in intimate spheres (e.g., families, peer groups, and schools), broader events and discourses (e.g., peace education law, government, and civil society peace-building programs), and their lived experiences. Drawing on this framework, I investigate how adolescents describe peace as part of their developing senses of self. I address two questions: *how do adolescents in and around Bogotá define and describe peace conceptually*; and *how do demographic factors (i.e., gender, age, socioeconomic status) relate to thematic differences in these descriptions?* The first focuses on meaning-making, and the second explores contextual differences highlighted by previous literature. By addressing these questions, I aim to not only provide further empirical insight into how Colombian adolescents were thinking about peace during the end of the peace process but also contribute to understanding the meaning-making that underlies adolescents' psychological engagement in peacebuilding (Hakvoort, 2002; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998).

Methods

From June to September 2016, along with a Colombian research assistant, I conducted semistructured interviews with adolescents across Bogotá and two nearby rural municipalities. During this period, peace was a salient part of discourse in Colombian society and schools because the final accords had recently been signed and were going to be voted on in a popular plebiscite in October. Bogotá was chosen for the investigation

because it is the country’s geographical, political, and social center. Furthermore, it is home to many displaced persons and victims, making the conflict salient, if not immediately present, in the city (ACNUR, 2017).

Sample

The 96 participants ranged from 15 to 18 years old and were from a diversity of backgrounds and local contexts (for full demographics, see Table 1). They attended 16 different schools (5 private and 11 public) that cover all six socioeconomic strata in Colombia. These strata are officially designated by the state based on levels of resources and range from one as “low-low” to six as “high” (Bushnell & Hudson, 2010). The sample was divided into three socioeconomic status (SES) groups for analysis purposes: strata 1% and 2 (51 %); strata 3% and 4 (24 %); and strata 5% and 6 (25 %). Bogotá is also a deeply segregated city; geographic location in the city is highly correlated with SES, and class relates to neighborhood, local crime and violence, and number of residents who directly experienced the armed conflict (Thibert & Osorio, 2014). The mean age of participants was 16.34 years old and 53% were male. Eighty-one interviews were with youth in Bogotá, and these were supplemented by a small sample of 7 students in La Palma and 8 in Cucunubá (two nearby municipalities). Nineteen of the participants self-identified as victims of the armed conflict, with the majority saying that someone in their family had been directly impacted.

Table 1. Demographics of Interview Sample.

	By SES (overall N = 96)			By Gender	
Location	Strata 1, 2	Strata 3, 4	Strata 5, 6	Male	Female
Bogota	41 (51%)	20 (24%)	21 (25%)	42 (53%)	39 (47%)
Rural municipalities	4 (27%)	8 (54%)	3 (19%)	9 (60%)	6 (40%)
		By age (years old)			
		15	16	17	18
		15 (16%)	45 (47%)	24 (25%)	12 (12%)

Procedure

All procedures were approved by the researcher’s institutional review board, and then discussed and agreed upon by schools where data were collected. Schools were chosen in conjunction with Colombian colleagues and researchers using maximum variation sampling to include the greatest possible diversity of local contexts (Patton, 2015; Suri, 2011). School administrators were contacted first. Once they agreed for their schools to participate, consent forms were given to a sample of students and their parents. The researcher worked closely with the administrator to make sure these participants were randomly selected from students in the appropriate age group. Participants were then interviewed individually in private spaces within the institutions for between 30 and 60 minutes. The lead author conducted the majority of the interviews, with a small number being conducted by a Colombian research assistant. The interviews covered various topics: opinions on the peace process, what peace meant to them, whether or not they believed that they lived in peace, and what they thought Colombia’s future would be like. Questions included, “what does peace mean to you,” “what do you think Colombia will be like in fifteen years,” and “will the country’s future affect you achieving the future that you want for yourself” (see Appendix for interview protocol). These procedures followed similar explorations of young people’s ideas about peace in past literature (e.g., Hakvoort & Häggglund, 2001; Hashemi & Shahraray, 2009).

Analytic Procedure

Interviews were first transcribed in Spanish and then coded using thematic analysis, a qualitative analysis tool that can provide rich analysis of patterns within interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The purpose was not to test hypotheses, but rather to use an inductive approach to identify participants’ meaning-making. To this end,

the theoretical framework detailed above was used to guide the choice of these areas of focus (i.e., on conceptual understandings of peacebuilding) and later to interpret the themes in the discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, I read through the entire interviews and coded them for general topics pertaining to this study's research questions. These initial descriptive codes related to the broad areas of the protocol (e.g., meaning of peace, role as a peacebuilder). Next, specific portions of the interviews were excerpted based on research questions; this study encompasses participants' discussions of their general ideas about peace (Parts 3 and 4 of the interview protocol). I reread these sections multiple times to become familiar with the data, and afterwards coded for portions related to meaning of peace. These initial codes included, as a few examples, mentions of harmony, dialogue, and personal security. Coding was then checked for reliability; a second researcher conducting similar work in Colombia coded a random selection of the excerpts (20%) using the same set of codes. Across this sample, there was 80% agreement in coding frequency and 77% across codes between the author and the second researcher (Yardley, 2007). The addition of extra codes was also discussed, and two codes were added (peace as possible and as considering other's perspectives) to the coding framework based on this input.

The codes were then analyzed inductively, and connected codes were grouped into broader themes that were checked for coherency, distinctiveness, and salience within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, excerpts were grouped by key demographic differences (i.e., gender, age, and SES) and analyzed for thematic differences. Again, in this approach, previous literature on these factors did not drive coding and themes but motivated exploring differences and interpretation after inductive analyses.

Positionality

In conducting this research and analysis, I strove to be attentive to my own positionality with respect to the young people who participated in the interviews. I approached them as a foreign academic (i.e., from the United States) with Colombian roots that are evident in my name but not always how I present or my accent. For each interview site, I entered the space with my Colombian research assistant—an undergraduate psychology student at a private university in Bogotá—and would openly engage school personnel and student participants with a discussion of my interest in the work after conducting interviews. In addition, I was able to access a number of schools through connections from my previous experience teaching for 3 years at an elite private school in Bogotá. This background provided additional context for the work because I taught at this school during the final years of the peace process with the FARC-EP. I am also fluent in Spanish and have an understanding of some of the particular terminology and references of Bogotá-area youth.

Findings

From these analyses, three interconnected themes emerged in how these adolescents described peace (see Table 2). First, participants described the internal state of individuals as a critical foundation and starting point for peace. Second, while peace was often described as requiring individuals to first focus on internal states and attitudes, the elements of peace were situated at a collective level. Third, some respondents defined peace as requiring equality in society. In answer to the second research question, the second and third theme varied by SES. For example, adolescents from the higher SES group tended to invoke equal treatment when discussing equality, whereas those from the lower one referred to material inequities or injustices. Minimal differences were found by gender or age.

Table 2. Themes From Analysis and Prevalence.

Theme	Description of theme	% of respondents (N = 96)
Peace is built from the individual outward	Peace can be built through individuals controlling, managing, and harnessing internal states and emotions.	55.2% (n = 53)

	The individual then draws on this to act and build peace through interpersonal action	
Peace as interpersonal	Elements of peace are interpersonal in that they involve aspects of social relations. Especially noted elements were harmony, tolerance, and respect.	1.3% (n = 78)
Peace constructed through equality	Peace involves a measure of equality among people, though this may refer either to equal treatment (e.g., acceptance of differences and freedom of expression) or equal opportunities (e.g., economic)	

Peace Is Built From the Individual Outward

Many respondents defined peace as beginning in the individual, which people could then draw on to build peace interpersonally. Peace was rooted in and depends on people's feelings and attitudes, which then support collective processes through one's actions toward others. To this end, inner calm and tranquility was necessary for being a peacebuilder in one's family, community, and, eventually, society.

Juan,¹ a man from the middle SES group, demonstrated internal basis in his response. He stated, "I think that peace also comes from one's self. Like, there can be conflicts and dilemmas in your life, but also you feel good about what you do. You yourself construct peace. You forge it through who you are." Juan situated peace in who each individual is and how they feel about themselves. Peace is about one's self-concept and connected actions. This perspective on peace as linked to an understanding of self was shared by some other participants like Sara, from a high-SES school. She said,

I think that you have to work at it through yourself. Work at peace and shape it in order to make it a reality. Simply, I am the one who can contribute to it. I am the one who causes harm to myself or who doesn't. That is where peace comes in. To know oneself and from that, to work toward peace. You yourself benefit if you think like that.

Like Juan, Sara connected peace to an understanding of self and who one is in the world. Importantly, in both cases and broadly across the sample, describing peace as built from the individual did not ignore interpersonal or collective dynamics, but rather focused on self-awareness and internal orientations as where peace began.

Other participants more explicitly rooted these peaceful relations between people in individuals' internal mindsets and self-control. For example, Jesús was from a middle SES school outside of Bogota and described peace in this way:

Peace has to develop from within. It is an understanding that you must tolerate others and act towards them as you would want them to act towards you. You must interiorize this, overcome your impulsivity and always forgive. For me, peace is this idea that begins inside of you and then you must act on it toward others.

Jesús depicted peace as built at a collective level (that is, peace ultimately is how people act toward each other) but also noted that how one acts and treats others begins with personal attitudes and orientations. Jesus placed the agency and onus on the individual, though the mechanism for how it is constructed is interpersonal. Other respondents echoed this relationship between an individual's internal states and peace at a collective level. Alejandro, from a high-SES school in Bogota, talked about how he handled tension with others as contributing to peace:

I consider myself to be a very open, very calm person. It's like, I don't see the need to hurt others. And if someone doesn't like what I do, I try to respect that. As in, I say to myself, well, okay. You don't like what I do, how I talk, who I am, well I'm not going to bother you or be bothered by that.

In this response, Alejandro linked his own way of thinking about others and conflict that arises to peace between himself and others. To this end, he situated peace as an interpersonal endeavor within internal processes, thinking, and resulting actions.

A focus on the individual—and specifically internal orientations and thinking—as the beginning of peace was a foundational piece of these adolescents' descriptions of peace. It was present across demographic categories (i.e., gender and SES) and linked into the other two themes that emerged from the analysis.

Peace Is Built at a Collective Level

Connected to this discussion of the efficacy of individuals in actually enacting peace, the elements that respondents attributed to peace were situated in collective processes involving interpersonal relations. That is, peace required individuals to foster internal states and act toward others based on these orientations, and was actually composed of social elements including harmony, tranquility, tolerance, and respect. These four elements, all linked to interpersonal relations, appeared often in descriptions of peace, though not necessarily all together.

This theme was present in the responses of participants from various contexts and backgrounds. Bryan, who attended a private school in La Palma, stated that peace is, "The harmony of living together in a society where prejudice and other issues don't exist. Where we all accept each other." Similarly, Guillermo, from a low-SES school in La Palma, described peace as "a society in which people respects each other's way of thinking. Each one respecting and collaborating with others, with those around them." As another example, Paulina, a female from a low-SES area of Bogotá, defined peace as, "the quality or value in embracing a person as they are. Loving them, tolerating them, respecting their differences and their way of thinking." These respondents exemplify the broader trend across the sample: participants often referred to interpersonal relations—specifically involving harmony, tranquility, tolerance, and respect—as what peace actually entailed. Peace was rooted in an individual's orientations and thinking, but took shape in how people treated each other at this collective level.

Within this theme, there was variance by SES. While high- and low-SES respondents talked about peace as related to collective processes (i.e., how people treated each other), some also described a bidirectional influence: interpersonal relations could affect internal states related to peace. They noted that a complete peace meant not worrying generally about external events or conditions or fearing assault by others. In this sense, one's context also affected feelings and emotions that were critical for peace. Eduardo, a respondent from the low-SES group, expressed that peace began with feeling calm and a lack of worry but that this was not possible because of crime and insecurity:

Peace is not being fearful that they will take something from you or being able to go out onto the street. Where one can live in calm. But they happen—for example in Colombia where you are always protecting what you have because you are in fear of others.

Some high-SES respondents also demonstrated this perspective. Mariana, for example, stated, "Living in peace is living without worry about what someone else will do to you or about your life being in risk. It would be living without such a big fear." Eduardo and Sebastian, as with many other respondents across all groups, situated peace in the individual. Yet, like many of their high- and low-SES peers, they also referred to the ways that people treated each other as impacting them. Witnessing or concerns about interpersonal violence engendered feelings of unease and anxiety that affected their sense of peace internally.

Respondents from the middle SES group, in contrast, were less likely to note these external dynamics as obstacles. They, in fact, often stated that peace was possible and described ways that individuals could contribute to it. Some from this group detailed how peace emerged from each person recognizing their responsibility and being willing to put in the necessary effort in their actions toward others. Examples included that peace required “each person to generate it,” that peace is meaning having to “deal with the problems and address them so that you can have an internal peace that helps you push forward,” and that peace is “an idea that is born inside of you to treat others as you would want them to treat you.” These middle SES respondents did not invoke significant obstacles related to collective or systemic factors, and instead asserted individuals’ agency: peace is possible because individuals who have the internal orientation can take ownership of peace and act toward others in certain ways to promote it.

Over the broader sample, however, the majority of participants defined peace as involving elements related to collective relations. Harmony, tranquility, tolerance, and respect were salient in descriptions of what peace entailed. There was variance related to the agency that respondents ascribed to individuals: for high- and low-SES respondents in particular, internal states—the root of peace—could be negatively affected by fear and worry at a collective level (i.e., others’ violent and harmful actions).

Peace as Equality

Finally, many respondents discussed equality as an element of peace but differed in how they invoked this concept. Many high-SES respondents asserted that the construction of peace involved all people being tolerated, treated with dignity, and provided the freedom to express their ideas and identities. In contrast, participants from low-SES schools often talked about the importance of equality for peace by detailing social, political, and economic inequity.

Some participants from high-SES schools talked about peace as equality in how individuals were treated in society. They noted that people have different perspectives, identities, and social positions. To avoid conflict because of these differences, all have to be accepted in society, as well as be treated fairly and respectfully. Demonstrating this conceptualization, Andrea, a 17-year old from an elite private school, maintained that peace meant each person could be themselves and would be tolerated as such.

I think that peace is everything that John Lennon talks about in *Imagine*. Peace is literally that song. It’s like, a bit of equality, a bit of respect for others, and I accept like your religion, your sexual orientation, and all those things that make people kill each other. So, I think peace is all this. Accept other human beings as they are.

Andrea acknowledged that people hold different beliefs and identities, while asserting that they all should be allowed to be and share these parts of themselves.

Another respondent from a high-SES private school, Julieta similarly affirmed that achieving peace meant, “arriving at a certain equality. Not that everyone thinks the same, but that each one—it’s like tolerance. That’s the word. It’s not that I have to totally support everyone, but I respect what they think and feel.” Julieta depicted peace as requiring that individuals, including herself, not discriminate or persecute others for their differences. High-SES respondents like Julieta and Andrea presented a peaceful society as one where difference is recognized and tolerated, and thus each person is treated equally. This perspective also further demonstrates how peace was situated as beginning with the individual: these respondents talked about equality as how people treat others. Further demonstrating this point, Julieta, Andrea, and others often described tolerating and respecting others in the first person.

In contrast, adolescents from low-SES schools who mentioned equality referred to economic or social conditions. Importantly, the majority of participants from low-SES schools described peace as beginning

internally (in line with theme 1), but there were a few who employed a structural framework, which was not evident in responses from middle- or high-SES schools. These students from low-SES schools alluded to a more equitable distribution of material resources and political power; peace required addressing poverty, starvation, and failings of the state. Unlike many of their peers, these participants thus offered a different view of peace as involving structural change, rather than internal states motivating interpersonal action. This perspective was evident in the response of Maribel, a 16-year old from a low-SES school who stated that peace was utopic. She rooted this pessimism in what she witnessed and experienced around her: material inequality and injustice causing conflict.

We will have peace when in the cities and countryside there is real respect for citizen's rights, and they don't simply say there is a ceasefire. Right now, there isn't a peace like that in Colombia because there will still be people starving, people violating human rights, and that isn't a country in real peace. Where all this happens, there is no peace.

Maribel invoked structural issues and defined peace as meaning basic rights and needs of all were met. Without dealing with the extreme social and economic imbalance that leaves many without basic needs like food or safety, there can be no peace.

Likewise, Mateo, a 16-year old from a different low-SES school, defined peace as the absence of violence. He then noted that conflict emerged from class divisions:

Sometimes people hold power against other people because they are poor. Because I am from strata six and you are strata one and so you are nothing. I think that perfect peace is something where there are no social classes, and we all have the same opportunities.

Mateo mentioned discrimination due to socioeconomic differences, but ultimately defined peace as the elimination of social classes and a greater equality of resources and possibilities. Maribel and Mateo exemplify the responses of participants from low-SES schools who linked equality and peace through a basis in social conditions. This perspective contrasted with high-SES students like Julieta and Andrea who tended to refer to freedom of expression and tolerance when articulating this connection.

Discussion

In response to the first research question about conceptualizations of peace, these adolescents tended to situate peace as beginning in the individual. They described it as emerging from and depending on internal states and personal orientations, which were then enacted in their actions toward others. Peace itself was defined at a collective level by these interpersonal relations: harmony, tranquility, tolerance, respect, and equality. Peace takes shape in social environments but depends on individual attitudes, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. This perspective importantly stands in juxtaposition to possible definitions that emphasize the role of leaders, institutions, or social systems (Berents, 2018; Galtung, 1996). For the second research question, minimal differences were found by gender and age, but participants from different SES groups varied in how they talked about the possibility of peace, obstacles that they noted, and how they invoked equality as necessary for peace. These findings not only build on current understandings of adolescent development in relation to peacebuilding but also provide concrete lessons for constructing supports to promote engagement in these societal endeavors.

The main theme in these adolescents' conceptualization of peace can be linked to developmentally salient concerns related to identity. Key developmental tasks in adolescence are consolidating ideas about who one is (i.e., sense of self and value systems) and interpreting one's social position based on increasingly broad interactions (Havighurst, 1948; Spencer et al., 2003). As these adolescents are figuring out their own roles and

positions in society, it is possible their ideas about peace mirror the dynamic between internal processing and positioning within a collective. This interpretation can extend ecological systems theories of adolescent identity development to understanding engagement with peacebuilding projects.

Previous studies have highlighted that intra and interpersonal dimensions of peace often appear in how adolescents define it (Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998). Yet, in this literature, the two aspects—the internal and the social—have not been explicitly connected. For example, a study of Italian university students found that serenity, harmony, respect, and friendship were widespread aspects in how peace was defined, but there was no discussion of how the intrapersonal (e.g., serenity) and interpersonal (e.g., respect) were related (Sarrica, 2007). In this study, participants described respect, tolerance, and other interpersonal elements of peace as emerging from internal states. Each person is ultimately an agent responsible for peace, and change must begin within each. Based on these internal orientations, individuals can then enact peace within collective groups. An understanding of peace as focused individually and moving outward contrasts with other possible frameworks that highlight the role of society, leaders, or institutions (e.g., Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015). Furthermore, developmental interpretations of these findings with adolescents have centered on cognitive advancements; that is, the emergence of more abstract thinking about concepts like society, democracy, and peace and the salience of identity development (Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998).

Drawing on ecological developmental theories, multiple influences may be at work in the findings from this study. First, these young people may be responding to dominant discourses about peace that place responsibility on the individual in shaping their social world (i.e., as a citizen or peacebuilder). The Colombian government's representations of youth and peace during the peace process emphasized individual agency and responsibility (Sánchez Meertens, 2018; Velez et al., 2019). While the current research project cannot address if these participants were directly exposed to the government's messaging, these discourses may have provided salient frameworks that they internalized, adapted, and reshaped in making sense for themselves (Jovchelovitch, 2007). The similarity of the government's discourse in these responses could indicate the influence of powerful conceptualizations of peace in their socioecological contexts.

This possible interpretation would also be supported by the lack of differences by age and gender, which was in contrast to existing literature. Previous research has indicated that female adolescents tend to focus on peace between friends and as the absence of interpersonal arguments, while males emphasize the absence of armed conflict or war (Sarrica, 2007). In relation to age, older adolescents have been found to hold more complex ideas about peace involving abstract ideals like democracy and human rights (Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998). The consistency across age and gender in this study could have at least two explanations: sample selection and salience of particular discourses. School administrators chose the interviewees and may have tended to select students who were more engaged in their schools. Participants may then have been more likely, no matter age or gender, to talk about peace as being constructed at the individual and interpersonal levels in which they themselves are active. Still, a number of participants state that peace was impossible; if high achievement and school involvement were primary explanatory factors, these sentiments would most likely be less prevalent. A second explanation is the salience of official discourses on peace and youth. As noted above, the Colombian government was promulgating a discourse about young people carrying the responsibility of building peace by acting as mediators and agents of change. Although adolescents engage in agentic, interpretive meaning-making processes, their ways of thinking about peace may take shape in response to salient conceptualizations that pervade their socioecological contexts (including media and school curriculum).

One possibility is that there is consonance between these discourses and their lived experiences. In other words, these participants may not simply be passively accepting an internalization of peace, but rather are embracing it as part of an agentic process of meaning-making and identity development (e.g., Spencer, 2006). To internalize peace and situate it at an interpersonal level may in fact be a protective coping strategy in response to the

enduring nature of violence in Colombian society. In a country where armed conflict, structural inequality, and insecurity proliferate, understanding peace as internal and as based in how you treat and act toward others offers an opportunity for agency and confirmation of self-efficacy.

Other elements in their responses offer evidence of this meaning-making situated within lived experiences. Many participants from high- and low-SES contexts expressed cynicism about the possibility of peace. As a developmental theoretical framework highlights, these young people think about peace based on their interpretation and emerging understandings of themselves and society. Although they may conceive of peace as built from the individual outward, if they also believe that their society is unsafe, conflictive, or intolerant, they may struggle to develop a sense of self-efficacy, of believing they can build peace in their neighborhoods and societies. While the history of the armed conflict touches the lives of Colombians across classes and geographies, in its current forms, violence is tied to the extreme inequality (Maldonado Carrizosa et al., 2017; Sánchez Meertens, 2018). For upper-class youth, this reality may manifest as fears and anxieties about insecurity that threatens their social place and identities as elites, while for disadvantaged youth this may be linked to more direct and local exposure. In these ways, the salience of violence may drive ideas about peace that are disconnected from the broader structural and systemic foci and more centered in themselves and their own actions.

These results, and the connected identities in relation to peace that young Colombians are building, can thus be illuminated by a socioecological understanding of adolescent development and meaning-making. This developmental framework coalesces well with the concept of “everyday peace,” which argues that localized and daily interactions, behaviors, and orientations are central to individuals’ peacebuilding and resistance to violence (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015). Attention to young people’s meaning-making provides insights into the orientations and actions they are already taking, as well as the challenges that they experience in their everyday lives (Berents, 2018; Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015). The framework extends current understandings of the developmental processes in young people’s thinking about peace (Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998): even as adolescents become increasingly able to think abstractly about systems (like democracy and human rights), they may build understandings of peace through experiences of efficacy within their local contexts among peers, families, schools, and neighbors.

Identity development based in everyday experiences may also be leveraged to support a critical engagement in peacebuilding. The perspectives of some participants in this study may highlight a space to bring two developmental processes together: abstract thinking about systems and the salience of localized meaning-making. Some respondents did not express that peace was built from the individual outward. A few students from low-SES schools described structural and systemic factors (e.g., injustice, inequality) as the primary work that needed to be done to build peace. Unlike other peers—including those who also attended low-SES schools—these participants may have focused on peace as systemic because of how they understood and processed the inequities and violence they experienced around them. Rather than internalize peace as a coping mechanism to assert self-efficacy, these participants may have had different frameworks for explaining these issues that allowed them to contextualize peace and their role in it. Participants who noted these obstacles did not express feeling unable to contribute to peace. While they demonstrated awareness about structural conditions as influencing peace, this broad lens did not determine disengaged outcomes. This finding connects to literature on critical consciousness and critical peace education that emphasizes the need to engage students in understanding how everyday actions and experiences link to broader trends in society (Bajaj, 2015). Societal conditions and local lived realities (i.e., violence in one’s neighborhood) may create obstacles to efficacy or political participation, but these contexts are not deterministic of negative outcomes and, in fact, can engender motivation for change (Hope & Spencer, 2017; Watts et al., 2011).

Overall, the findings from this study provide an opportunity for supporting programming in Colombia that fosters these young people's development as peacebuilders. If the individual is the key agent in peace, then adolescents may respond positively if given opportunities to contribute to peace in their local contexts (e.g., as peer conflict mediators, tolerance workshops in the community). For contexts beyond Colombia, these findings highlight the importance of peace at multiple levels to support young people's development of self-efficacy as peacebuilders. These adolescents demonstrate the potential for peace education curriculum that supports localized, everyday engagement in peace, connecting the local to the abstract and systemic, and fostering efficacy as part of meaning-making processes.

Limitations

While these findings can contribute to literature on peace and adolescent development in transitional contexts, this study has important limitations that should be addressed in future work. First, the sample was diverse across SES, location, and gender in Bogotá, Colombia's capital. While Colombians from all over have settled in Bogotá, the sociopolitical context there is markedly different (Maldonado Carrizosa et al., 2017). Other areas have been differentially affected by armed conflict, are under control or influence of other armed groups, and experience varying levels of state presence. Furthermore, cultural frameworks that were salient in these results (i.e., an individual focus) may not appear with other groups, such as indigenous or Afro-Colombian youth, who were not a significant part of this sample.

As with much of the literature on meaning-making of peace in young people, this study did not include a direct assessment of how thinking about peace translated to action. The theoretical framework based in development and peace studies supports this study's orientation to exploring interpretation as a part of eventual engagement in peacebuilding. Nevertheless, the connection needs to be more clearly developed and verified using longitudinal and other data sources that delve into young people's actions.

Conclusion

Adolescents have the potential to play a pivotal role in transitional settings. How they interpret and process key civic concepts like peace is one step in the construction of identity and peacebuilding orientations. To this end, attention to how adolescents make meaning of peace can offer insights into how peace might be built (Galtung, 1996; Sarrica, 2007). Many of these Colombian adolescents situated peace as beginning in the individual and then building through interpersonal relations. Understandings of society and social relations also related to their expressed beliefs in the possibility of peace and individuals' abilities to actually contribute in this way to it. These themes can be interpreted as related to developmental concerns and, specifically, the processing of salient societal discourses in Colombia.

Understood in this way, these findings offer a possible place for intervention to promote peacebuilding identities in Colombia: providing greater opportunities for them to witness and personally experience peace enacted both internally and interpersonally. While the implementation of peace education in Colombia has been varied and underevaluated (Sanchez Meertens, 2018), the mandate could be harnessed for this end. Curriculum, guidelines, and resources could be developed that foster self-efficacy and promote orientations toward peacebuilding both by providing these opportunities and demonstrating the possibility of change. This implication also connects to research on civic development demonstrating that practicing democratic citizenship and participation in educational settings can promote proactive and prosocial civic outcomes (e.g., Torney-Purta, 2002). If these young people conceive of peace as rooted in individual orientations, being given opportunities to take action and see peace manifest may then bolster both identity development as a peacebuilder. Still, particularly in settings like Colombia, structural obstacles to peace exist, and further linking these actions and

changes to more expansive systems may help more young people develop a critical consciousness connecting their own actions to peacebuilding (Bajaj, 2015).

More broadly, this study extends previous work that demonstrates that young people are actively constructing meanings about ideas like peace. Their meaning-making is related to the contexts they inhabit; the discourses, experiences, and norms in their social environments, and their own psychological processing (Spencer, 2006). Studying this process from a developmental psychological lens can both provide insights into how to more effectively bolster engaged and active outcomes for young people as potential peacebuilders. While promoting young peoples' identity development as peacebuilders may alone not be sufficient for a culture of peace, it is an important focus because young people are key actors in more peaceful futures for transitional societies like Colombia. Before peace can be built, it must be conceived, and adolescence is a crucial time for supporting understandings that can underlie an engaged orientation as a peacebuilder.

Appendix

Interview Script Questions

Part 1. Peace process

- a. What do you think about the peace process?
- b. Do you think the peace process will change Colombia?
- c. In this context, do you think forgiveness and reconciliation are possible?
- d. Where have you learned about the peace process and the history of the armed conflict?
- e. Have you or your family been affected by the conflict?

Part 2. The future

- a. What do you think the country will be like in the future?
In 15 years, do you imagine Colombia will be the same or different?
- b. Changing to talk about you personally, how do you see yourself in 15 years? What do you want to be and what do you want to do?
- c. Do you think that the country's future is connected to yours?
- d. Will it affect you achieving the future that you want for yourself?

Part 3. General ideas

- a. In general, outside of the context of the peace process, what does peace mean to you?
- b. What is your role as a citizen?
What does being a citizen mean to you?
How should you act as a citizen?
- c. What do human rights mean to you?
What are some examples?
Are human rights respected in Colombia? Why or why not?

Part 4. Peacebuilding

- a. Do you think that you are able to support peace at a national level? Why or why not?
- b. In your community?
- c. What have you done in the last year to support peace?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for interviewees to maintain anonymity.

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