Article

'We're Meant to Be Crossing Over … but the Bridge Is broken': 2020 University Graduates' Experiences of the Pandemic in Ireland

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Abstract

We interviewed university graduates of 2020 in Ireland to understand how the coronavirus pandemic had affected them. Demonstrating a keen awareness of their mental health, participants had adopted self-care practices such as mindfulness. They recounted positive experiences of life in their 'lockdown homes' with supportive families. Some were embarking on normative adult pathways sooner than anticipated while others opted for postgraduate study to bide time. Participants reported heightened worry/anxiety and had limited their media use in response. Their plans did not extend beyond the immediate future, reflecting a degree of resignation. The participants accepted the strict constraints associated with pandemic management in Ireland. They did not view themselves as members of a group that was likely to experience the long-term costs of the pandemic but rather were attempting to negotiate their own pathway through labour market uncertainty while also demonstrating high levels of solidarity towards vulnerable groups in society.

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Introduction and Study Context

When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020, unprecedented public health responses ensued, including closure of educational institutions. For the university graduates of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic coincided with a life stage that involves transitions to work or further study. The pandemic is likely to result in significant inequalities in how young adults can cope with its ramifications and will resonate in their lives for decades (Settersten et al., 2020). While it is widely recognized that the coronavirus pandemic will have major, long-lasting effects, we currently lack the tools to understand the scope and variety of these impacts. This research study offers a unique insight into the experiences of college graduates of 2020 in Ireland, providing a reference point for future research on the implications of the pandemic for young adults.

We investigated the lived experiences of students who completed their first (Bachelor's) degree in Ireland during the spring/summer of 2020 and examined how the early stages of the pandemic affected their personal lives and future-related thinking. The graduating class of 2020 incorporates individuals of all ages, but as our focus is on young adults and those seeking to enter the labour market or post-graduate education for the first time, we delimited the investigation on those aged 25 or younger. We conducted 16 in-depth interviews with graduates from colleges in and around Dublin to understand how they had responded to the suddenly and severely curtailed social and economic landscape in Ireland.

The topic of young adults'—or more specifically university students'—responses to a global pandemic is largely unexplored, for the obvious reason of its novelty. Against the backdrop of literature that is currently only beginning to emerge (e.g., Baloran, 2020), we used the Grounded Theory (GT) method, which is ideally suited to exploration of new, poorly understood topics (Timonen et al., 2018). Data collection and analysis run parallel in GT, and from the early stages of analysis, concepts begin to take form, which are pursued through systematic comparison and further sampling in order to refine these and arrive at a theoretical proposition of the main processes. Among the different 'schools' of GT, we adopted the constructivist GT (CGT) approach (Charmaz, 2014). CGT brings to the fore the engagement of researcher(s) and participants in the process of generating knowledge: their interaction produces the data and the meanings that the researchers derive, with close attention to the temporal, cultural and structural context.

Educational institutions in Ireland were closed on 12 March 2020. The first stage of the COVID-related restrictions in Ireland—a period that came to be known as 'lockdown'—lasted 5.5 weeks (28 March–5 May 2020) and was severe: people were told to stay within 2 km from their dwellings and all face-to-face social interaction outside one's household was proscribed. A further five-week period (5 May–8 June 2020) involved a minor increase in the movement limit to 5 km, and subsequently to 20 km. Throughout this period, people were advised to avoid any non-essential face-to-face contact with people from outside their own household. *Cocooning* was used by the Irish Health Service Executive to refer to individuals over 70 years of age or others who were deemed vulnerable. 'Cocooning' individuals were instructed to stay at home and minimize their face-to-face contacts.

The fieldwork stage of our research study began on 12 June 2020, during the later phase of lockdown as restrictions were eased. As the last interview was completed

on 7 July 2020, the context of this study is the immediate 'post-lockdown' Ireland where many restrictions were still in place (e.g., pubs and entertainment venues remained closed).

Research Methods

The Research Ethics Approval Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin granted ethical approval to this study on 21 May 2020. The study adhered to all key tenets of ethical research: informed and voluntary consent, non-malfeasance, beneficence, confidentiality and anonymity. Two avenues were utilized to recruit research participants: social media and snowballing from personal contacts. The target demographic is adept with social media, and we identified Twitter as the most suitable social media platform because it does not require sending unsolicited requests to potential participants for inclusion in their social networks. The project Twitter page was used to retweet relevant content and to issue tweets promoting the project and calling for participants. Posts were retweeted by other users through their Twitter networks. While only one graduate participant contacted us directly via Twitter, several participants attested to verifying the project's credentials through Twitter.

Snowballing out from researchers' personal contacts was a more productive approach to recruitment. This involved sending WhatsApp and email invitations to researchers' contacts which were then forwarded by recipients to potential participants within their networks. For instance, academic staff at other universities were contacted and asked to distribute the project information to final year (i.e., graduating) students. Snowballing tends to extend sampling to additional participants whose backgrounds and characteristics are broadly similar to those of the initial contacts; for this reason, it is not ideal for reaching marginalized groups, a feature of our sample that we acknowledge to be a limitation. All interested participants made initial contact via email (as instructed in the invitation to participate) and all received the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form by return email. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym and nine did so; researchers assigned pseudonyms to the remaining participants.

We used a short interview guide that proceeded from a general framing of the participant's life to an account of their experiences of the lockdown and subsequent period. We also asked about the participants' home lives, and their views pertaining to the political management of the pandemic (the interview questions are listed in Box 1). In line with theoretical sampling, we probed into emergent themes and points raised by each interviewee (Conlon et al., 2020).

We conducted 16 interviews with five men and 11 women, aged 21–25, who were about to graduate from four different universities in the Dublin (capital of Ireland) area. Participants' pseudonyms, general degree subject areas, location of residence and who they were living with at the time of the interview are listed in Table 1. Although the participants are a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse group (e.g., Ella was the first in her family to complete university; William, Debbie and Timmy had immigrant parents), the fact that all our participants had the time, IT equipment and ability to participate in video call interviews did have the effect of

> **Could you tell me a little about yourself—anything important that comes to mind.** *(This served as a general introduction to interests and circumstances of particular importance for each participant.)*
>
> **Colleges in Ireland closed in mid-March. Can you tell me about your life since that date?**
>
> **In the weeks that followed the closure, how did you get on with study and assessments?**
>
> **Could you tell me about your 'lockdown household'—who you lived with and how you got on?**
>
> **As the restrictions are being/were** *(depending on the timing of the interview)* **eased, how did that change things for you?**
>
> **If you were to try to summarize your experience of the pandemic so far, how would you characterize it?**
>
> **Can you tell me about how you view your immediate future, say until the end of this year?** *(Where relevant:* **and how about the longer perspective, say one year or so from now?)**
>
> **Would you like to make any comments about the government policies around the lockdown/unwinding of the restrictions/the near future for young people in Ireland?**
>
> **Is there something that is relevant for this topic, but we have not discussed up to this point?**
>
> **Is there anything *you* would like ask before we finish the interview?**

Box 1. Interview Guide

Source: The authors.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	General degree subject area	Location at the time of interview/ travel distance from capital	Living with
Ella	Social sciences	Capital	Mother and siblings
Kevin	Social sciences	Town 1–2 hours	Parents
Patrick	Social sciences	Town <1 hour	Parents and a sibling
Ciara	Business	Town 1–2 hours	Parents and siblings
Mia	Business	Town 2–3 hours	Parents
Grace	Social sciences	Capital	Mother and siblings
Alison	Computing	Capital	Parents and a sibling
Molly	Health sciences	Capital	Parents
Conor	Arts and humanities	Town 1–2 hours	Parents and a sibling
Sarah	Social sciences	Rural 3–4 hours	Parents and siblings
Eric	Arts and humanities	Town 1–2 hours	Parents and siblings
Emma	Engineering	Town <1 hour	Mother
William	Architecture	Town 1–2 hours	Mother and siblings
Debbie	Business	Capital	Parents and siblings
Anne	Arts and humanities	City 3–4 hours	Parents
Timmy	Applied commerce	Town 1–2 hours	Parents and siblings

Source: The authors.

pushing the sample composition towards those who had the material and mental resources to participate.

Further recruitment was paused after the 16th interview as we had reached saturation around key concepts and did not anticipate being able to recruit additional participants who could open up new avenues in conceptual terms. We did consider various proactive ways of trying to reach participants with particularly negative experiences of the pandemic (e.g., young adults whose families were under severe economic pressure due to job losses, or who would be willing to disclose major mental health problems arising from the lockdown) but we decided that this would not have constituted an ethical practice at this point in the pandemic, where many were doubtlessly experiencing such difficulties and struggling to find supports to meet their needs. As a result, our sample and findings reflect relatively 'benign' experiences and did not capture the major difficulties or indeed trauma that were experienced by some harder-to-reach groups of graduates.

Interviews ranged from 39 to 72 minutes, averaging 54 minutes. All interviews were conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams and backed up on a voice recorder. Twelve of the 16 interviews were conducted by two researchers (one leading the interview and the other focusing on notetaking) and four were completed by one researcher. No interviews had major technical issues. We felt that video interviewing was a positive experience: it was possible to build rapport with participants and to generate good-quality data.

Immediately following each interview, the second interviewer (notetaker) wrote a memo capturing the main points and generating initial analysis of emergent findings (in line with the GT method). Data analysis started with open and focused coding for concepts, yielding a total of 11 initial concepts (e.g., *experiencing family as supportive*) as listed in Table 2. In line with Charmaz's (2014) advice, most of these concepts are phrased as gerunds, to capture the *doing* and *being* of participants. Six of these 10 initial categories related, broadly speaking, to 'the private sphere', and five related to 'the public sphere'. Further theoretical sampling (Conlon et al., 2020)

Table 2. Analytical Process

Initial concepts	Grouping of concepts	Categories	Core categories
Turning inwards for strength and coping	Concepts pertaining to the private sphere	Self-care	Cocooning for the young
Being able to focus on degree completion		Family as primary source of support and site of solidarity	
Increased closeness with family			
Experiencing family as supportive			
Expressing strong intergenerational solidarity			
Loosening friendships (due to distance)			
Uncertainty about work/career	Concepts pertaining to the public sphere	Uncertainty	Negotiating own path
Changing plans			
Shielding against media/news		Filtering elements of external world	
Approving of pandemic management		Abiding by the rules	
Not perceiving the collective; no 'global' view			

Source: The authors.

for more encompassing concepts and collapsing of concepts into categories (where two or more were inter-linked) led to the development of five categories, two relating to the private and three to the public sphere. After further probing into commonalities and underpinnings of the categories, two core categories were identified: *cocooning for the young* and *individualized pathfinding in pandemic*. This process of iterative data analysis is illustrated in Table 2.

Findings

We will discuss the findings pertaining to each category in the order they are presented in Table 2, starting with categories relating to the private sphere of self and family.

Self-care

Although university tuition continued online during spring 2020, many participants felt that they needed to develop new routines to keep motivated and occupied. Molly referred to the time during lockdown as 'monotone': she had assignments to complete but felt that 'everything was dragging…the days were just repeating'. Debbie said that she had been distracted by college life and had more 'time to think' during the lockdown. Kevin described the lockdown as an opportunity to 'press the reset button'.

Twelve of the 16 graduates reported incorporating new activities into their daily routines. While Patrick noted that the lockdown was the first time in several years that he felt he could 'switch off', he also emphasized the importance of devising 'your own system' for coping. Seven of the participants outlined distinct self-care practices that they had initiated during the pandemic, including yoga, meditation, journaling, and reading self-help books. In addition to such new practices, participants also relayed generic, established practices such as reading, or going for walks. Grace explained that journaling enabled her to 'sort out my own thoughts, so anything that came up I just worked through'. Sarah used a journal to schedule her day but more importantly, to set aside time to be more reflective after the hectic pace of college life:

> I learnt a lot about myself and what I really do enjoy and what I don't enjoy…you reflect when you're by yourself, when you have that much time. During a normal busy college day you forget to have time for yourself and I realized how much I do like time for myself, to settle and just be comfortable with my own thoughts...it's important to slow down and just kind of be with yourself.

Turning inward for strength and coping had given many participants the opportunity to reflect on their life goals and priorities. Debbie used a combination of techniques that helped her to 'hear my inner voice'. She began meditating to get through the stressful exam period and practised mindfulness which helped her to 'keep sane and not lose my mind…to take time out and not think about anything'. Several participants described developing better eating and exercise habits and reported feeling

fitter and healthier than before. Ciara had started running every day during lockdown. Emma had started doing yoga and reported feeling much stronger mentally. She planned to use summer 2020 as a time to relax and but also to 'look at myself and who I am 'cos I never really gave myself time to be alone, but now I'm like, all about it, I love being alone now which is something really strange to me'. Some participants conjured up images of solitary country walks during lockdown, and for others such as Alison, walking presented an opportunity to escape from the household and to 'clear the head'. A shared walk could also deepen family relationships. Molly had gone for a walk with her mother every evening during lockdown; this enabled her to talk things through and helped her to cope.

Overall, a picture emerged of participants retreating into themselves and engaging in more solitary activities through self-care practices or physical activities. Many had found the lockdown period to be an opportunity to pause and reflect on their lives and had adopted new strategies to adjust to their situation. We were surprised that these (eminently sensible) self-care practices were so readily taken up by young adults; this readiness might be something that various forms of mental health awareness and emphasis on self-care in educational settings have fostered. Next, we turn to examining relationships with the people that the participants were—literally—closest to during this phase of the pandemic, namely family members.

Family as Primary Source of Support and Site of Solidarity

Nine of the 16 participants lived in their parental home while studying and one was staying with her older sibling's family to facilitate a manageable commute to college. From a comparative perspective, this reflects the fact that young adults in Ireland tend to leave home at a relatively late stage, largely due to limited student housing supports and the high cost of accommodation, especially in urban centres. For these 10 participants, the announcement that colleges were closing down in March 2020 did not bring about a relocation. For the remaining six participants, the college closure announcement brought about a sudden relocation from rented accommodation in Dublin to the 'family home' in different locations around Ireland. This relocation was recalled in vivid detail due to the sheer haste, nervousness and even fear associated with the sudden, strict directions to 'go home' issued by colleges in mid-March (the parental residence was invariably referred to as 'home'). Four participants—Ella, Grace, Emma and William—lived in one-parent households, while 12 lived with both parents, reflecting Ireland's comparatively low divorce rate.

Regardless of whether they returned home unexpectedly or continued their residence there, the transition into 'lockdown households' did represent a major change for all participants. Those who had already been living at home were no longer able to make regular trips to college, or to meet friends. For those returning home alongside other siblings, this meant that the 'empty nest' of the parental home turned into a household with several adults. Some of those who had to return home expressed feeling as if they had reverted to being secondary school students. Mia—who had lived away from her parents for several years—referred to the challenge of defining herself 'as an adult in the house'. However, these sentiments were conveyed in a humorous manner and did not appear to reflect grievances against the parents.

Despite this significant change in their living arrangements and the sudden (literal) closeness with their parents (and in most cases with 1–3 siblings), none of the participants reported major conflict in the household. One participant, Grace, mediated a minor conflict between her two younger siblings in the background of the video call interview, but appeared to be practised in resolving such disputes. We believe that this absence of accounts of conflict is partly due to social desirability bias, which might be especially strong in the context of a video-call interview: the participants might have concealed their negative experiences as norms around (portraying) family solidarity are strong in Ireland.

Nonetheless, we were struck by the generally positive accounts of living at such close quarters with parents and other family members for an extended period of time, especially as the early stages of lockdown in Ireland imposed severe limitations on freedom of movement. Contrary to the expected tension in homes, we heard accounts of emotional closeness, ability to relax and get college work done. Conor referred to his family's home and the surrounding semi-rural area as 'lovely and quiet', and his study space and broadband connection as 'a good set-up…I transferred very smoothly from college to home'. Distinct benefits were associated with the confinement to the lockdown family home. William referred to lockdown as convenient and almost liberating because he no longer had to commute between home and college and could rely on steady supply of snacks: 'I can go down to the kitchen and get food…and continue working on my project'. Anne acknowledged that being confined to her sister's family home—where she was able to focus on completing assignments—'worked to my benefit':

> … [my sister] gave me the space like, when I was really like trying to get a lot done and there was deadlines, my sister, she would say, 'no, you don't have to clean up after dinner' or whatever. She gave me that time, she was very good in that way. She'd be like: are you ok? I'll bring up coffee. She was very supportive so that really helped.

Only two participants hinted at tensions in their 'lockdown home'. Sarah described the convergence (she and her three siblings) on the family home after years of living separately as a big change. After a week or two, they were 'down each other's throats', fighting for the best internet connection in the house. It took a while for the family to work out a routine and things improved after everybody started to assume responsibility for domestic routines such as cleaning. Alison used the words 'tough', 'tricky' and 'suffocating' to describe the period of trying to work and study from home:

> ... it was tough enough … we have an office and space in the kitchen and sitting room … we were kind of rotating … whoever had the most important thing on that day got to use the office for a meeting or an exam or whatever … it was tricky—definitely there were days when people were getting on people's nerves, especially when the two-kilometre restrictions were in place, it was really kind of suffocating.

However, the overall picture conveyed by Alison was of a supportive family which she describes as 'very happy and there was no financial disruption…my family definitely pulled through very well and strongly and we all supported each other, so that was good'. The overall picture that emerged of these participants' 'lockdown homes' was

one of safe and supportive havens. Most participants expressed some degree of appreciation towards the support they received from their family during the lockdown; for instance (younger) siblings had agreed to be quieter or made space available. One participant, Debbie, shared a desk with a sibling, while participants from affluent backgrounds were able to 'take over' extra space in the home such as, in Emma's case, a sun room and in Ciara's case, a spare room turned into her personal study space.

Having outlined the key categories relating to the private sphere—turning inwards and experiencing family as supportive—we outline the findings pertaining to the public sphere, which were marked by feelings of uncertainty and compliance with government-imposed restrictions.

Uncertainty

Uncertainty regarding their next steps in the world of work was a distinct pattern across the sample. Even the small number of graduates who had secured a job by the time of the interview faced the prospect of a different mode of working, such as remote working for Mia. In some cases, uncertainties associated with the pandemic were prompting a quicker orientation to normative adult milestones than planned. Patrick was planning to find a job commensurate with his degree qualification—'heading into the world of work sooner than I had planned'—and moving out of his parental home, instead of going travelling. Alison had secured a desirable graduate role so swiftly that it had taken her by surprise as she had not planned to work immediately upon graduation. She said that taking this job was 'the smart thing and the right thing to do' (in view of the pandemic), but she also found the prospect of entering employment 'scary … at this age to see your path totally paved in front of you'. Outside career-related plans, two-thirds of the participants had intended to travel during summer 2020, but with just one exception (Anne), these plans had been abandoned due to public health advice to avoid non-essential travel.

Some graduates—notably those from lower-income backgrounds and rural areas—felt powerless and daunted in seeking employment in the midst of a pandemic. Ella lived in a one-parent household and represented the first college-educated generation in her family; in her words, looking for work was 'scary' because 'nobody is taking anyone on'. She felt that she had no choice but to put her life 'on hold':

> … everything I wanted to do or dreamed of doing, it's like, it's on hold for now or it might just not happen …. It's like we're at that point where the bridge is, but there is no bridge … we're meant to be crossing over to the other side now, but the bridge is broken.

While Ella felt ill-equipped and discouraged to even begin a job search in earnest, Ciara had taken action by sending off '50 random job applications'. The concern for Ciara had arisen when she only received three responses and witnessed the number of applicants responding to vacancies on LinkedIn reaching as many as 3,000 applications per job. Ciara had been offered a graduate contract before the pandemic but had declined it because it was not the career she wanted. During the interview, as her thoughts were turning to the intensified competition for jobs, she wondered if she had done the right thing. This was particularly hard for Ciara as her brother—who had graduated just a year earlier—had experienced no difficulties in securing

desirable employment. Emma had a similarly 'disheartening' experience of job-hunting and was resigned to part-time work in the hospitality sector for the time being, which also meant that her plans to find an apartment with her boyfriend were put on hold as they could not afford to pay rent. Downward adjustments in expectations were ensuing from such experiences.

Due to labour market uncertainties, many participants contemplated postgraduate study as a sensible 'stop-gap', a way of enhancing their credentials while biding time. Among this group, we were intrigued to see several graduates confining their search of postgraduate options to the educational institution from which they had just graduated. This pattern might reflect need for security in the face of future uncertainty but also determined attempts by colleges to hold onto their own graduates in view of 'disappearing' overseas students. Conor and Debbie were planning to continue with their 'tried and tested' college. Molly had an opportunity to go directly into a PhD programme at her undergraduate university. While this might appear to be a great opportunity, Molly felt ambivalent because it was not what she had planned to do. In contrast, Eric had decided against immediately pursuing a postgraduate course because the prospect of online learning did not appeal to him.

When we invited the graduates to reflect on the future, their time horizons generally did not extend beyond one year at most. This is unsurprising in view of the difficulties and uncertainties they were facing in the immediate future and is broadly in line with recent international literature on young adults' time horizons and future-related thinking (Cook, 2018; France et al., 2019). Interestingly, the exceptions to this pattern were participants with immigrant parents. Debbie (whose parents had immigrated from East Asia) had a detailed narrative about her future, which she positioned in the story of her older family generations, and her own (future) children's generation. She wanted to set a good example for future family generations by pursuing higher education and becoming an entrepreneur.

William (with African and Irish parents) had an elaborate and ambitious vision about his future career. However, he also felt under pressure to secure a job—*any job*—as soon as possible and in fact had started calling into restaurant premises on the very day his previous (hospitality sector) employer let him go. This illustrates the tensions between long-term, ambitious plans and the need to have an income among graduates from lower-income backgrounds. However, William was able to maintain a positive attitude: he did not think the pandemic had affected his employability, it had 'just pushed' things forward, and he believed that 'everything will work itself out in due course'. This optimism is remarkable, given that just a few months earlier, he had planned several major 'adult' milestones for summer 2020—finding a job, moving away from home, getting a driver's license and taking a holiday—all of which he had to abandon.

Debbie, William and Timmy (from East European background) expressed a heightened sense of duty and responsibility towards their families and were more concerned about the economy than the Irish participants, perhaps because the implications of an economic downturn were more direct for them. The subjects that these three participants had chosen to pursue in college were also pragmatic and closely linked to employment in potentially economically lucrative sectors. However, the recession now overshadowed their future careers as it affected the sectors they had chosen.

Filtering Elements of the External World

All research participants shared varying degrees of anxiety related to the pandemic. The atmosphere of fear was fuelled by media reports on the increasing numbers of daily local and global mortalities and 'cases' (infections). Thirteen of the 16 participants recounted a preoccupation with checking news updates, which they described using phrases such as 'obsessively checking the news', being 'glued to my phone', 'constantly checking, refreshing, updating'. Updates about the pandemic were also relayed by family members on communal occasions such as dinner or video chats. The constant exposure to multiple sources of news alongside fear-based rumours, opinions and future projections soon led to 'media fatigue' as many participants, already struggling to focus on exams and assignments, felt increasingly overwhelmed. Participants expressed feeling conflicted about managing their media consumption—wanting to keep informed about current affairs, but also feeling the need to shield from anxiety-inducing news. According to Ciara:

> It came to a point when I blanked it all out, especially when it got to the worst in Ireland and then I stopped looking. I didn't like what I saw. It was just very scary with all the deaths.

Ciara's comments are indicative of most participants' discomfort with experiencing the mounting fear and distress that came from following the news. The common strategy to deal with this was dissociation (blanking out) and avoidance. Not reading or listening to the news provided some respite from experiencing difficult feelings related to mortality, especially the possible loss of loved ones:

> As I started reading it (news) more, and the deaths, I was like, the more deaths that keep happening, the closer it could get to someone close to me and that's when I started kind of panicking. (Molly)

Molly chose to stop listening to the news which provided some temporary relief. Yet, as Grace observed, shielding oneself from the media did not mitigate the reality of the pandemic. Grade described the struggle between managing her news intake to preserve her mental health, and remaining socially aware:

> I was trying to find a balance, I think. I didn't watch the news. All I watched was when Leo Varadkar [Prime Minister of Ireland] made his announcements of any new kind of restrictions, and every evening I got an *Irish Times* update of the cases and the deaths. I don't know if that was the best idea (laughs). I just tried to keep informed because as much as ignorance might be bliss, it's not.

Similarly, Ella described the toll of frequent news updates on her mental health, and the actions she took in response:

> I actually said to my Ma [mother], 'I don't want to watch any other news because it's playing on my mind'…you're dreaming about the pandemic and about the things on the news. I know myself, I'm like that…it plays on my mind. (…) I deleted my Facebook. I deleted my Twitter because I said I can't engage with this anymore. It's just too much. And even now with this Black Lives Matter movement - it's an area I am really interested in, but I can't engage with it anymore because it's just a lot coming at you.

All 13 participants who discussed managing their media intake shared that they began to limit their sources, sometimes filtering news through family members, relatives or friends. Some put a daily time limit on their media use. Patrick, Kevin and Mia confined themselves to checking general news updates once or twice a day. Debbie deleted all news apps on her phone and decided that if she wanted to get updates, she would Google topics of interest. Emma got her newsfeed through an RTE (Ireland's public service broadcaster) app on her phone but preferred the ritual of watching the six o'clock TV news in the reassuring company of her mother and boyfriend. Ciara relied completely on her family to update her and stopped listening to news altogether: 'I wouldn't go searching for it'. William's current affairs updates were either mediated by his mother or by what happened to 'trend' on social media—such as the Irish Prime Minister's use of a quote from the *Lord of the Rings* film in one of his speeches ('It's only a passing thing, this shadow…A new day will come, and when the sun shines, it'll shine all the clearer').

This disengagement with media corresponds with participants seeking forms of self-care such as meditation, fitness and yoga, suggesting an inward gaze at the individual self through introspection and reflection rather than an outward focus on society as part of a larger global community which in turn relates to the final category pertaining to the public sphere, namely compliance with the pandemic-related restrictions.

Abiding by the Rules

'Abiding by the rules' relates to the finding that virtually all research participants reported being compliant—taking the coronavirus-related restrictions seriously and following them closely. For some, this was almost reflexive (unquestioningly obliging as a social and community duty), even when it came at a cost to socializing and freedom of movement. Illustrative of this are Debbie's statement that ' [the government] know what they are doing—I follow the rules—I trust them' and Anne's belief that 'if you follow the rules, you'll be fine…that's what we've been told'. Timmy claimed he was not afraid of contracting the virus as he was 'smart' and kept to social distancing rules, believing that he could manage his health by 'taking precautions and responsibility' (eating healthy foods and exercising). Such statements point to the underlying belief that the risk of infection could be successfully managed through individual actions including disciplining the body by pursuing healthy behaviours (e.g., washing hands, exercising) and following government rules and restrictions (minimizing contacts, social distancing). This way of thinking stems from an individualized perspective that places responsibility for risk management on personal action or non-action.

The inclination to trust and comply with official pandemic guidelines is connected to intergenerational solidarity and social solidarity more generally. Participants worried about unknowingly passing on the infection to their family and exhibited a heightened sense of responsibility relating to the protection of older family members, in particular grandparents. Among the many examples of this pattern in our data, the most striking is Eric's decision to desist from physical closeness with his girlfriend so that he could continue visiting his grandmother during the lockdown. This created conflict between him and his girlfriend who did not want to socially distance because she was not in contact with an 'at risk' person.

As the participants were compliant with the restrictions and inclined to take recourse to their own coping strategies and their family circle, and set about next steps such as job-seeking under a highly individualized view of their own path-finding, it is not surprising that very little of the data speaks to concerns with out-comes for their own cohort, let alone broader global concerns or generational consciousness. None of the participants critiqued government policies in dealing with the pandemic; there were no calls to develop new/emergency labour market or other policies for young adults (a fact that we, the researchers, were very surprised by). Only one participant (Conor) briefly made a link between the pandemic and global environmental issues (loss of ecosystems) which he believed would contribute to future pandemics.

Rather than viewing themselves as victims or protesting against the implications of pandemic management (that are undeniably extensive for young adults), participants exhibited a degree of disconnect with their broader social and political environment, which was further magnified by their 'cocooning' from mainstream media. While some participants demonstrated awareness of current social and political issues (in particular, Black Lives Matter gained a lot of traction in Ireland), there was a sense of resignation about doing anything that could make a difference at a collective level in politics. The voices of young people have been missing from debates about the impact of COVID, and this lack of visibility of their own generation might have contributed to this general sense of disconnectedness from pandemic policymaking.

In the rare cases where participants (implicitly) portrayed themselves as part of a generational collective, this was done in very general terms, and with a sense that developments such as large-scale (youth) unemployment were *inevitable*. In Sarah's words:

> … ideally, I'd like to have something sorted by September, like a stable job, a civilized job, but at the end of the day, *I can't really do anything about it*. All I can do is what I'm doing, keep trying to find my ideal job that I want, not to just rush into something….I do need to remind myself, look, at the end of the day, *everyone's in the same position* and it's a pandemic…but it won't last the rest of your life and *take it day by day and hope for the best*, that I will get my job…I will find something, I will find what I want at the end of the road, *it's all about patience*. [Italics are our emphases]

Sarah's account of her (to date unsuccessful) job search evinces a sense of inevitability—which in turn is linked to young adults' disinclination to criticize highly restrictive policies that have produced a sharp increase in youth unemployment in Ireland in the absence of a strategy to combat it. Instead of directing frustration and critique at decision-makers, they perceived a need to navigate their own way through the turmoil, by taking recourse to (or trying to cultivate) inner strengths and attitudes such as patience, 'taking it day by day' and 'hoping for the best'.

Discussion: Cocooning and Finding One's Own Path

At the culmination of their university education, participants were used to freedoms and lifestyles that ended abruptly in March 2020. Demonstrating a keen awareness of their mental health and the need to adjust, many incorporated self-care practices

such as mindfulness or journaling and healthier eating and exercise routines into their daily lives. The graduates recounted overall positive experiences of being confined to their 'lockdown homes'. Their supportive families provided an opportunity to pause and reflect although for some, their newly solitary lives resulted in loosening of college-based friendships that had been 'left behind' and a return to family environment that was experienced by some as reverting to a younger life stage. Changing plans were a recurring feature and some participants were attempting to embark on normative adult pathways sooner than anticipated for instance by taking up employment rather than travelling. Others planned to opt for postgraduate study as a pragmatic way to bide time.

All participants reported a heightened sense of worry or anxiety and most had attempted to limit their social media intake to shield themselves against the onslaught of bad news about the pandemic. Despite reaching an important juncture in their lives, the plans of all but two graduates did not extend beyond the next few months or a year at most, reflecting a degree of resignation to what they saw as an inevitable situation. The young people in our sample were compliant and accepting of the strict rules and constraints associated with pandemic management in Ireland. They had not begun to view themselves as members of a cohort that was likely to experience the long-term social and economic costs of these restrictions. They were navigating their own pathway through the uncertainty and labour market risks associated with the pandemic with the help of individualized strategies.

The term 'cocooning' came to be used during the pandemic as shorthand for the recommendations issued to the older population in Ireland. It refers to self-isolating and avoiding all but essential contact with others. In public discourse, cocooning was applied to older people and others at heightened risk of severe illness or death from COVID. We use this term here purposely to encapsulate the inward- and family-oriented behaviours of the young adults in this study: they evinced a striking tendency to seek safety and support in their personal and family lives. The core category *cocooning for the young*—pointedly borrowing a term used in conjunction with older populations—underlines this orientation to self-care and the family as a marked response by the young adults in our study.

The participants were practising various kinds of cocooning to shield themselves from certain concomitants of the pandemic such as media content that invoked negative emotional responses. They took recourse to various self-care practices to ward off feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, worry or boredom. In part, cocooning reflects the familistic nature of the Irish welfare state. As the supports for students are limited and as universities issued a directive to leave student accommodation, it is not surprising that the participants had little choice but to return home and rely on their families. However, what was more surprising is the relative ease, for most, in settling back into the role of a 'child at home'. This pattern is further accentuated by the finding that, in many cases, the participants reported a distinct loosening of their former friendship networks after retreating from their university lives to living 'back home'. The centrality of personal lives (Smart, 2007) is evident in these findings, although Smart's ideas around connectedness are not (unsurprisingly, given the unprecedented context) fully consonant in our findings where the 'social horizons' of the graduates were shrinking.

The second core category—*negotiating one's own path*—is about seeing oneself as an individual who has no choice but to tackle the challenges arising from the

pandemic with the help of one's own devices—efforts at job seeking in the face of almost impossible odds; taking whatever job is available because of financial needs; meditating; networking online or simply waiting and biding time. Even those who had jobs (at the time of the interview or in the pipeline) saw themselves as working from home (i.e., in isolation) or having to look for something else in the short term. The participants' strategies were highly individualized; they evinced little or no awareness of themselves as members of a cohort that has had its opportunities severely curtailed.

Individualized pathfinding reflects the fact that participants approached the uncertain labour market as isolated individuals: they were trying to chart their own path through the uncertainty. This chimes with the constant flux and uncertainty associated with liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991), individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), and the concept of risk society (Beck, 1992, 1999). Very few participants referred to any broader societal patterns let alone saw themselves as members of a cohort that has been hit particularly hard. There was no sign of generational consciousness (Mannheim, 1928/1952); or it might be that such consciousness had not yet emerged at the time of our interviews (summer 2020). While these graduates' individual coping mechanisms might come across as admirable in their stoicism and cautious optimism, they nonetheless reflect a remarkable detachment from domestic politics, and inability or unwillingness to express any critique at what is happening to large numbers of young adults as they seek to establish themselves in the labour market.

Conclusion

We argue that the graduates in our study were engaging reflexively individualized strategies. Focusing on self-care and taking solace in family were responses that drew on readily available resources in a situation where there was an immediate need for focus, calm and reassurance. While shielding against the onslaught of news and social media was a deliberate strategy brought on by feelings of being unsettled by the constant media focus on the pandemic, it also relates to the impulse to centre on one's immediate circumstances, which for the participants in this research were by and large favourable (as they had generally stable home environments and were confident of completing their degrees). These reflexively individualized responses are consonant with the fact that the participants did not call for collective responses to the corollaries of the pandemic; for instance, no participant demanded specific labour market supports, let alone public employment schemes for young adults (Murphy et al., 2020). There was no evidence of 'generational consciousness'. It therefore appears, at least for now, that even a global pandemic might not bring about a strong sense of a generational experience in young adults. As our data were collected at a relatively early stage of the pandemic, in a particular context (summer 2020 in Ireland), it is possible that further investigations of young adults over time and across contexts will reveal the emergence of a sense of a generational experience, and perhaps even shared responses to some of the impacts of the pandemic. This recourse to their own resources and strategies was observed in tandem with striking levels of trust in the state and inclination to follow rules despite the cost to personal freedom and opportunities, something that can be understood as an

expression of social consciousness and collective awareness. The high level of concern with the impact of COVID on vulnerable groups in society counters the stereotypical portrayal of young adults as egocentric and self-serving.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Virpi Timonen, a Finnish national who earned her doctorate at the University of Oxford, work focuses on life course sociology and social policies as they are unfolding in ageing societies. Since her PhD was awarded in 2001, Professor Timonen has produced over 120 published research outputs on ageing, care, welfare states and intergenerational relations within families and societies.

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