
Life Experiences of Refugee Students. Exploratory Descriptive study of Resilience among Three Palestinian students at Abderrahmane Mira University, Bejaia.

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of Palestinian refugee students. The ultimate purpose is to shed light on possible resilience. The study took place at the University of Bejaia and focused on three cases. A descriptive case study method was adopted. A semi-directive interview and a resilience measurement scale were used to conduct the research. The results indicated the presence of resilience, but at different levels in our cases, demonstrating the need to optimize this resilience.

Keywords: life experience, refugee students, Palestinians, resilience.

Résumé : L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer le vécu des étudiants réfugiés palestiniens. La visée finale étant d'éclairer une résilience éventuelle. L'étude s'est déroulée au sein de l'université de Bejaia et a porté sur trois cas. Une méthode descriptive avec étude de cas a été adoptée. Pour la réalisation de la recherche, un entretien semi-directif et une échelle de mesure de la résilience ont été retenus. Les résultats ont indiqué la présence d'une résilience, mais à différents niveaux chez nos cas, ce qui démontre la nécessité d'optimiser cette résilience.

Mots-clés : vécu, étudiants réfugiés, palestiniens, résilience.

1- Introduction

According to a press release from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) dated Wednesday, December 13, 2023, the number of people displaced by war, persecution, violence, and human rights violations worldwide is likely to have exceeded 114 million by the end of September 2023 (<https://www.unhcr.org/fr>).

We are currently witnessing several conflicts around the world. In particular, the Russian-Ukrainian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, with thousands of dead, wounded, and refugees.

As a result, the "refugee" issue is now a true global humanitarian problem. This question raises many issues of political, social, and cultural history. That said, it is no less relevant to our own field, that of clinical psychology.

This record figure is a wake-up call, indicating that being a refugee is an existential reality that researchers, including those in clinical psychology, will have to address.

Among the refugee population are students. Their numbers worldwide are not really known, as there are no statistics to date that can accurately describe this category, so why is it difficult to quantify it precisely? The UNHCR reports that in 2018, 3% of refugees had access to higher education, meaning that 87,833 refugees are now in higher education. In previous years, this percentage was 1% (<https://www.unhcr.org>).

As a result, initiatives to welcome them into universities are emerging and multiplying by the day, through programs, training, scholarships, and other specific actions.

Algeria has not remained indifferent to this phenomenon. In fact, a project called Creation of Institutional Capacities for the Integration of Refugees in Higher Education (CI-RES) was launched in 2020 with the aim of creating institutional capacities for the integration of refugees in Algerian higher education. This international project, CI-RES, falls within the framework of Erasmus+ projects and has seen the participation of 10 universities (5 Algerian and 5 European). The refugee students come from Palestine, Western Sahara, Burkina Faso, and Mali, among other countries.

The number of refugees enrolled at the Algerian partner universities is as follows: Sétif 2: 35 refugees, Ouargla: 70, Bejaia: 65, and Tizi Ouzou: 3), with an average of over 5,000 refugee students in all Algerian universities. In addition, from 2022 onwards, offices and units will be set up in several universities for the benefit of refugee students. A total of four offices will be dedicated to welcoming

refugee students at each partner university's vice rectorate in charge of external relations. There are also 33 offices in all (<https://www.ciresproject.eu/le-projet/>), all of which will be staffed by vice deans in charge of international relations at faculties.

On November 29, 2022, the University of Bejaia set up the Refugee Student Office, "le Bureau des Étudiants Réfugiés (BER).".

Furthermore, according to information provided by the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, the number of Palestinian students in Algeria reached 422 in 2023 (Mecelti, 2024), and the number of Palestinian students graduating from Algerian universities reached 25,000 students (Hadjer, 2016).

As a result, being a refugee student can eminently represent a destabilizing or challenging and difficult event, given the changes it entails in the life of the individual in question, and especially if the country of origin is in intense conflict, as is the case in Palestine today. The consequences are diverse and likely to lead to psychological disturbances, and resilience lies in the ability to adapt and to regain control of oneself after the event.

Consequently, this study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. I chose to conduct this research because there are very few studies and writings on the mental health and experiences of refugee students. Despite the amounts of literature on the subject, there is little clinical writing on refugees' experiences, and few studies have focused on developing an understanding of the refugee experience as a whole. There is almost no clinical psychology literature on the National Portal for Thesis Reporting PNST (Portail National de Signalement des Thèses) and ASJP (Algerian Scientific Journal Plateform) portals, and few studies on a national or international scale. I also opted for this theme because of our sensitivity to the reality of refugees in general and refugee students in particular.

The general aim of this research was to describe, from a qualitative perspective, the subjective experience of refugee students, in order to better understand this psychological experience as lived and described by them. Here, "lived experience" refers to all the emotions, experiences and feelings experienced by the subject in question. The secondary objective is to focus on a specific component of this experience, namely resilience, in order to assess its presence in our cases.

2- Operational definitions of key study concepts

Student :

- A student, to put it simply, is a person who is studying at a university or institution of higher education. As for the term refugee, it refers to a person who has left or fled their original country because they were in danger (persecution, war, natural disaster, violence, etc.). A student is a person who is studying at a university.

Refugee:

A refugee is a person who has left his or her country of origin for political, religious or racial reasons.

Resilience

Resilience refers to the ability to overcome difficult, destabilizing or even traumatic events. It's the ability to adapt, to bounce back from painful situations, to succeed despite adversity, and to continue to give meaning to one's existence.

3- Problem and hypothesis:

Entry into higher education is a pivotal moment characterized by a double transition: one developmental, marked by the passage from adolescence to adulthood, the other academic, marked by the transition from high school to higher education (Shankland, Gayet & Richeux, 2022, pp.9-10).

According to Tronchet (2019), these are the conflicts of the early twentieth century, such as the wars in the Pacific. This was the case of the 541 Korean students who took refuge in the United States... or the First World War, which gave the issue of students in exile an increasingly international dimension: During the Great War in particular, thousands of Serbian refugee students knocked on the doors of higher education establishments in allied or neutral countries (France, United Kingdom, Russia, Switzerland), before, in the immediate post-war period, the fate of 15,000 refugee students from Russia and thousands of other refugees from Central and Eastern Europe (mainly Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians and Greeks) was elevated to the status of an international problem by the League of Nations and international non-governmental organizations.

The 1930s and the Second World War helped to de-Europeanize the international debate on student refugees. In China, the term *liuwang xueshen* (student refugee) first appeared during the Sino-Japanese war, before being applied to students fleeing the civil war between Chinese nationalists and

communists. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the issue of student refugees gained in importance. From the end of the 1940s until the 1980s, the crises of decolonization and the Cold War multiplied areas of friction and forced student mobility, and rapidly shifted the focus to student refugees. The conflicts and major diplomatic crises of the Cold War (the Prague coup, the Budapest uprising, the Prague Spring, the Vietnam War, etc.) were also refugee crises that put national and international policies and structures to the test in managing the flow of migrant populations, particularly students.

With the 1980s and 1990s, and the end of the Cold War, interest in student refugees declined. While the issue of student refugees grew in importance throughout the twentieth century, its treatment did not benefit from stabilized structures and normative frameworks.

As a result, so-called "refugee crises" are often also university crises. Many of the people living in exile are students who have interrupted their studies in their country of origin. Yet the issue of student exile is not a new one. It arose throughout the twentieth century (Tronchet, 2019, p.94).

Universities have long welcomed refugee and asylum-seeking students, but the migratory crises of 2010, followed by the population movements of Syrians fleeing their war-torn country, have strengthened and made this welcome more visible (Busson, 2021, p.4).

According to Abdellatif Mami (2022), Algeria's vast territory is bordered by unstable and conflict-ridden regions, sending ever-increasing flows of migrants and refugees. With a view to preparing Algerian and Mediterranean universities to better integrate refugees, the CI-RES project was born. The project was conceived and conceptualized in Algeria. It has been developed in collaboration with a number of Algerian universities and the Ministry of Higher Education.

The refugee student is not a normative category fixed by international law, and there is a certain vagueness surrounding this category.

In this sense, according to Daoudi, Chercheneff, Larché and Pauté (2022), a refugee is defined under the Fourth Geneva Convention on the Protection of Civilians (1949/1977) as a civilian protected by international humanitarian law, and under the Geneva Convention (1951) as a person displaced from their country as a result of persecution, serious violation of human rights or other forms of major harm, and according to the OAU (African Union) Convention (1969) as a person who, as a result of specific events, is obliged to leave his or her habitual residence to seek refuge in another place outside his or her country of origin or nationality.

In this study, the object of study (refugee student) simply refers to a foreign student from a territory in conflict or an occupied territory, who finds himself outside his country of nationality.

The literature review consulted for the purposes of this research (see bibliographies) indicated that the student population is vulnerable to mental health problems, and that exiles, whether asylum seekers or refugees, represent migrant populations that are particularly psychologically fragile, due to severe traumatic experiences and negative life events.

In fact, as life events unfold, we all have to cope with difficulties both big and small. Some people are able to adapt and adjust, and bounce back from difficult ordeals or even traumas thanks to individual or environmental resources. This is what we call "resilience".

In this context, resilience is a human quality that refers to a person's ability to cope with, adapt to and recover from life's difficulties, challenges and adversities. It implies the ability to bounce back from stressful or traumatic events, and to find internal and external resources for positive recovery and development.

In the student world, Shankland and Gayet (2021) write that the capacity for resilience is crucial for students because, in addition to contributing to their psychological well-being, fulfillment and adaptation in higher education, it acts as a protective factor against depression and academic burnout (Broc et al., 2020).

Moreover, very few field studies have been conducted, to our knowledge, on the experiences of refugee students. We cite Sasia's (2018) study titled "*être étudiant et réfugié,*" which looked at 25 young Syrians, aged 18 to 28, participating in a welcome program at the 'Université Paris-Est Créteil,' using interviews. The results show that although they are victims of a war that is beyond them and that it is difficult to be refugees and students, they seize on dramatic events to reshape their life paths, thus becoming actors in their exile. We also cite the Frozzini and Tremblay (2021) study entitled "*Le vécu des étudiants internationaux dans une région éloignée du Québec,*" in which they examined the experiences and state of interactions between international students, teachers, and staff at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC) located in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region of Quebec (Canada). The study explored the issues that arise during these students' academic careers in a context of resocialization and identified the various challenges associated with the situation both inside and outside the university, including the city's infrastructure. A number of findings emerged regarding the needs of international students and teachers, including a

lack of resources, follow-up, and services, despite relative experiential satisfaction.

What is more, Palestinian refugee students, the subject of our research, find themselves caught between the quest for knowledge and the weight of an unprecedented war. In 2023, there were 422 of them in France ([http: aps.dz](http://aps.dz)).

As a result, it seems clearly that refugee students often go through a difficult period. They may experience stress, anxiety, depression or even severe psychological suffering. However, some manage to cope with the challenges they face, particularly those of an academic and social nature. Others report a positive experience of change.

Based on what we have stated above, and in order to carry out our research, I formulate the following question:

- Question :

Are the refugee students in our research group likely to be resilient?

As a tentative answer, I formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis:

The refugee students in our research group would be resilient.

4- Research methodology

To carry out this study, I adopted a descriptive approach. This choice can be explained by our interest in the qualitative aspects of refugee students' experiences, which enables us to acquire in-depth knowledge of the problem and understand the phenomenon under study.

Our entire research approach adopts a qualitative methodology. This method is perfectly suited to our objectives of shedding light on the experiences of our study population. What is more, this method is suited to research in a transcultural context.

However, the field of qualitative research encompasses a wide range of approaches. I opted for the descriptive, case-study method, to capture the unique subjective experience of each of our participants - in other words, the uniqueness of each case.

The case study is a specific technique for gathering, formatting and processing information, which seeks to capture the evolving and complex nature of Phenomena concerning a social system with its own dynamics. The case study

method therefore consists in reporting a real situation taken in context, and analyzing it to see how the phenomena the researcher is interested in manifest themselves and evolve (Mucchielli, 2009, p.143).

The case study can be the object of a synthesis of the elements gathered through the traditional tools used by psychologists in their so-called "armed" practice, such as tests, evaluation scales or direct observation (Marty, 2013, p.54).

The case study suits our research objectives, as our study is exploratory, and in particular, it allows us to illustrate complex and new phenomena. In this sense, the case study is a qualitative descriptive technique of research methodology, which focuses on the totality and singularity of the cases studied using a set of tools, with the aim of providing a meticulous description after observing the interrelations between the variables studied, taking into account the historical context of the case, its personality, its mental and cognitive functioning, its social environment...etc. It is an in-depth, detailed study of a subject that helps to illustrate and provide a detailed description that can be analyzed.

Considering that our field of study is higher education, I carried out this study at the Abderrahmane Mira University in Bejaia, more precisely at the Aboudaou campus. The contribution of the vice-rectorate in charge of external relations was invaluable.

The research group is made up of three Palestinian students aged between 22 and 23, enrolled in a master's program or studying medicine. They are all single and arrived in Algeria in their first year at university. It should be noted that all names have been changed and replaced by others to preserve anonymity, and that I have complied with all ethical and deontological rules governing research in clinical psychology, especially as our theme and our study population is quite "sensitive".

To collect data, I used a semi-directive interview and a standardized resilience measurement scale. The first tool enabled participants to talk quite freely about their feelings, and was well-suited to our research on a fairly sensitive subject. An interview guide was used to guide the gathering of information in line with our objectives.

The interview guide is as follows:

Phase 1: Welcoming the refugee student

- Reminder of the study's objectives and the ethical and deontological rules of clinical psychology research.

- The refugee student is given the opportunity to speak (does he or she have any questions?).

- Free and informed consent to participate in the research.

Phase 2: Questioning

- Introduce yourself in a few sentences (age, education, family, etc.)

- Can you tell us about your schooling (primary to high school)?

- In what year did you enroll at this university?

-What is your experience of studying here in Algeria?

- Can you tell us about your academic results (grades, average,etc.)?

- Can you describe your relationship with your teachers and fellow students?

- Have you experienced any difficult periods during your studies here in Algeria (periods of depression, stress, suicidal thoughts)? If so, please tell us about them.

- How do you cope with your difficulties?

- Can you tell us something about your current health (are you ill, sleep, appetite, mental state, etc.)?

- Can you tell us how you are coping with being away from your family?

- How do you see your future?

Phase 3: Conclude

-Speech given to the refugee student (does he have any comments or things to add that he feels are important and that we haven't discussed with him).

- Acknowledgement of research participation.

In this context, I drew up an 11-question semi-directive interview guide. I chose to adopt this guide because it corresponds very well to our research objective. The guide was divided into three phases: the first, entitled "Welcoming the refugee student," included three general questions; the second, "Questioning," included 11 questions relating to the refugee student's experiences and the exploration of his or her resilience; and the third, "Conclusion," gave the student the floor and thanked him or her at the end.

The instructions in the interview guide were as follows: "I'm a researcher in clinical psychology, and I'm carrying out a study on refugee students in Algeria, and more specifically on their experiences, so I am going to ask you some

questions, and I'd like to have your answers. Through this investigation, I am seeking to gather your experience. This study is completely anonymous, and our interview will be confidential. I would like to thank you for agreeing to take part in my study”.

To interpret the interview data, the verbatim from the interviews was transcribed. We tried to identify clues that would help us answer our questions about the nature of his experience and his possible resilience. The data collected using the interview guide were qualitative and therefore not very quantifiable. I then proceeded with an interpretation based on the chosen approach.

In analyzing the qualitative data from the interviews, we took a step back from the remarks collected in an attempt to extract meaning from them in order to answer our questions and verify our hypothesis. As for the scale chosen, this choice was dictated by the fact that it is widely used in international research, possessing solid psychometric qualities and representing a reliable tool for measuring resilience in a student population (Jourdan-Ionescu, Ionescu, Tourigny, Hamelin & Wagnild, 2015). The use of this instrument is intended to indicate the level of resilience of study participants.

Furthermore, this research was carried out in accordance with the ethical and deontological rules governing psychological research. In particular, students were informed of the purpose of the study, were free to participate in it, and were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality of information and consent to participate in the research without any pressure. Students may withdraw at any time without prejudice or justification. Furthermore, aware of the "vulnerability" of our study population, I have opted for oral consent to avoid arousing the suspicion of our research subjects.

5- Results and discussion

I conducted our study within the CI-RES student refugee support office, giving our cases an appointment, and using an interview guide and the resilience scale. It was explained and confirmed to the subject that all information would be kept anonymous and for research purposes only. The students were really cooperative during the course of the study.

I let the subjects express themselves freely about their experiences and feelings, as well as their representations. It should be noted that during this pre-investigation, all subjects were informed of our study project, and they were all free to refuse or participate. The pre-survey gave us the background we needed to define our research and develop our problem, formulate our question and

hypothesis, collect data and analyze it to discuss the hypothesis. Finally, I would like to thank all these people for their help and contribution.

5-1- Results of the study:

-Case 1: Faycel

At the interview: Faycel is a 23-year-old Master 2 student in hotel management, his parents are healthy, he has three sisters and four brothers, all of whom are in Palestine. He is single. Throughout the interview, which lasted forty-five minutes, he wanted to express himself and share with us his feelings and experiences of his studies and exile. He told us that "my academic career wasn't easy, because at certain levels of study I was living under psychological pressure because of the wars my city was going through. They were constant attacks. However, thanks to my parents, I overcame these difficulties and achieved top marks in my studies. And after finishing the last year of high school and getting an average of 15/20, I got a university scholarship in Algeria, and here I am finishing my last year in Master 2, thanks to God." In 2018/2019, he has enrolled in the first year of university in Bejaia. He adds that he is always worried and sad because he is afraid of his fate and that of his family, that they're always facing death, and this plays on his morale because he can't even communicate with them or hear from them for quite a while now, but he focuses on his unknown future with willpower, prayer, reading the Koran, sport and spending time with his friends...

So Faycel spends his time trying to adapt to the situation and wishing for a bright and happy future.

On the scale: the total score obtained is 156, indicating a resilient or even very resilient character according to the scale used.

- Case 2: Karim

At the interview: after we introduced ourselves to Karim, he seemed delighted to be interviewed by us. Karim is a 22-year-old 4th-year medical student in Bejaia, whose parents are in good health. He has two sisters and two brothers, all in Palestine. He was excellent in his studies. His study experience in Algeria is described as good, in the first and second years he had an average grade of 13, and in the third year he had an average grade of 11. He has good relations with his group mates and friends in residence. He overcomes these problems by calling his mother or trying to find suitable solutions, and he says he enjoys good mental and physical health. At first, he had some difficulties, but once he got used to it and adapted, things got better. He's looking forward to future success.

On the scale: the total score obtained is 143, indicating the presence of a moderately resilient character.

- Case 3: Fateh

At the interview: after we introduced ourselves to Fateh, he seemed delighted to be interviewed by us. Fateh is a 23-year-old Master 1 Law student from Bejaia, his parents are healthy, he has two sisters and three brothers, the fourth having died when he was young. He is single. His academic record is very good. He joined the university in 2020, and his study experience in Algeria is one he does not regret, even if it has lasted four years and several months, and he misses his family. His average grade in the first year was 12.5, in the second year 13 and in the third 11.5. His relationship with his classmates is good. In his opinion, he overcomes difficulties quite effectively. At present, he is still anxious about the situation in Palestine. He has no appetite and is very afraid of losing his whole family in a second. He lives far from his family, trying to work hard for his family and himself. His future is currently unknown, he says, because of the situation at home.

On the scale: the total score obtained is 122, indicating the presence of a moderately resilient character.

5-2- Discussion of the hypothesis:

From these results, I can say that our hypothesis is confirmed for our three cases. However, resilience is at different levels, and the sub-scores indicate that resilience is due either to personal skills or to acceptance of self and life. Moreover, this resilience seems to require optimization in our cases, particularly in Karim and Fateh.

6- Conclusion and recommendations:

The integration of refugees in higher education is now an established fact in Algeria. Given our country's historical role and geographical position, it receives an increasing number of refugee students of different nationalities, including Palestinians. Indeed, Algeria has a long tradition of welcoming Palestinian students. This is an important contribution for people who have been living under occupation for decades.

As a reminder, the aim of this study was to explore the nature of the students' experience and assess their resilience. Resilience refers to the ability to

cope with life's challenges using resources. The study was carried out with three Palestinian refugee students at the Ci-RES office on the Aboudaou campus of the University of Bejaia. The tools used to carry out the study were a semi-structured interview armed with an interview guide and a resilience measurement scale.

Thus, our research has shed light on the plural and complex dimensions of the experiences of refugee students in Algeria, focusing on their academic, social, and psychological backgrounds. Our findings demonstrate significant resilience, supported by a range of adaptive mechanisms and coping strategies. In this context, resilience manifests itself as a dynamic interplay between individual resources, such as intrinsic motivation and perseverance, and external resources, such as institutional and community support. The results also revealed the hope these students have in continuing their studies.

Interpretation of the qualitative and quantitative data collected during the study of three Palestinian students revealed the importance of an inclusive academic environment and social solidarity in the integration process. Algerian academic institutions, despite certain challenges, play a crucial role in offering specific educational opportunities and support services to refugee students. The study also highlighted the beneficial impact of informal support networks, which help to create a sense of belonging and improve students' psychological well-being.

However, despite significant progress, obstacles persist, particularly in terms of language barriers, economic difficulties, and social prejudice. Our study has shown that certain suffering, due to the difficulties and challenges faced by refugees, is present among refugee students. These factors sometimes hinder the full integration of refugee students and require special attention from political decision-makers and stakeholders in higher education to develop normative and institutional mechanisms for better integration and to set up committees to provide academic support during their training. This will ensure that these students have a better experience and optimum resilience.

In conclusion, I hope that this study has shed some light on the experiences of refugee students. This research shows that the experience of refugee students is a reality that needs to be taken into consideration. It can be said that this work has opened a breach for future investigations into this population, which has aroused the interest of very few researchers but which deserves to be studied and brought to the fore. It is in this context that I encourage further, broader studies of refugee students.

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