

Identity Resilience and Professional Project Reconstruction Among Internally Displaced Youth: The Case of Young People Settled in the Central Region of Burkina Faso

Elie Corneille Dakuyo

Centre Universitaire de KAYA, Université Joseph KIZERBO, Burkina Faso

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the processes of identity resilience and professional project reconstruction among internally displaced youth settled in the central region of Burkina Faso. In a context of security crisis that has caused the displacement of more than 2 million people since 2016, this research focuses specifically on the adaptive mechanisms developed by young people aged 18 to 30 to reconstruct their professional identity after a major biographical rupture. The methodological approach is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 internally displaced youth, analyzed using a thematic analysis approach inspired by grounded theory. The results reveal three central processes of identity reconstruction: narrative reappropriation of life trajectory, creative adaptation to new professional opportunities, and mobilization of community and family resources. The study highlights the importance of psychosocial protective factors in the development of identity resilience, particularly social support, access to professional training, and recognition of skills acquired through adversity. These results contribute to a better understanding of identity reconstruction processes in crisis contexts and offer perspectives for psychological support of displaced populations.

Keywords: Identity resilience, professional reconstruction, internally displaced youth

Introduction

Burkina Faso has been experiencing an unprecedented security and humanitarian crisis since 2016 that has profoundly disrupted the life trajectory of millions of people. Repeated attacks by armed terrorist groups have forced more than 2 million individuals to abandon their usual place of residence to seek refuge in areas considered safer (Action contre la Faim, 2021, p. 1). This situation of forced displacement particularly affects young people, who represent a significant proportion of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and face major challenges in identity and professional reconstruction (UNICEF Burkina Faso, 2025, p. 2).

The central region of Burkina Faso, with Ouagadougou as its capital, constitutes one of the main reception areas for these displaced populations. According to data from the Burkinabè government, this region hosts a significant portion of the 2.1 million displaced persons recorded in March 2023 (United Nations, 2021, p. 1). For displaced youth, this forced migration represents much more than a simple geographical change: it constitutes a major biographical rupture that calls into question their identity, life projects, and professional future prospects (Gnessi, 2024, p. 15).

Problem statement and theoretical issues

The question of identity reconstruction after trauma or major existential rupture constitutes a central field of investigation in clinical psychology and vocational psychology. The work of Dubar (1998, p. 102) on professional identity and insertion narratives has shown the importance of narrative processes in the construction and reconstruction of work identity. In the specific context of forced displacement, these processes take on a particular dimension, as they occur in a context of loss and discontinuity that requires specific adaptive mechanisms.

The concept of identity resilience, developed by Fougereyrollas and Dumont (2009, p. 67), offers a relevant theoretical framework for understanding these reconstruction processes. Identity resilience is defined as an individual's capacity to maintain or reconstruct identity coherence in the face of traumatic or destabilizing events. This capacity involves not only resistance to the negative effects of trauma, but also the creative transformation of adverse experience into a resource for personal and professional development.

In the field of vocational psychology, the work of Masdonati et al. (2017, p. 165) on consensual qualitative research has emphasized the importance of adopting appropriate methodological approaches to capture the complexity of identity construction processes. These approaches allow for accounting for the singularity of individual trajectories while identifying common patterns in identity reconstruction strategies.

Specific context of Burkina Faso

The Burkinabè context presents specificities that influence the identity reconstruction processes of displaced youth. On one hand, Burkinabè society is characterized by a strong tradition of hospitality and community solidarity, which can constitute an important protective factor for displaced populations (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2019, p. 45). On the other hand, pre-existing economic and social challenges, exacerbated by the security crisis, limit opportunities for professional and social integration of young people, whether displaced or not (Ouedraogo, 2023, p. 78).

Recent data indicate that 50% of displaced persons in Burkina Faso are children under 14 years old, which underlines the magnitude of challenges in terms of education and professional training (Humanitarian Action, 2024, p. 12). For displaced young adults, the situation is particularly complex as they find themselves at a critical age for constructing their professional identity and establishing their economic autonomy.

Research objectives

This study aims to understand the processes of identity resilience and professional project reconstruction among internally displaced youth settled in the central region of Burkina Faso. More specifically, it seeks to:

1. Identify the psychological and social mechanisms underlying identity reconstruction among internally displaced youth;
2. Analyze the strategies developed by these young people to reconstruct their professional projects in a new context;
3. Examine the role of protective and vulnerability factors in identity resilience processes;
4. Understand the influence of the Burkinabè sociocultural context on these reconstruction processes.

Scientific and social relevance

This research is situated in both fundamental and applied perspectives. On the fundamental level, it contributes to the advancement of knowledge on identity resilience processes in crisis contexts, a domain still little explored in the French-language literature in vocational psychology. On the applied level, it aims to provide elements of understanding useful for developing psychological support and professional integration programs adapted to the specific needs of internally displaced youth.

The qualitative approach adopted allows for capturing the complexity and singularity of lived experiences, while identifying patterns likely to inform intervention practices. This approach is part of the tradition of qualitative research in psychology, which privileges in-depth understanding

of human phenomena rather than their quantification (Santiago-Delefosse, 2004, p. 135).

Method

Methodological approach

This research adopts a qualitative approach of interpretative phenomenological type, particularly suited to exploring subjective experiences and meaning-making processes (Drapeau, 2004, p. 8). The choice of this approach is justified by the complex and multidimensional nature of the phenomena studied, which require an in-depth understanding of the meanings attributed by participants to their experience of displacement and identity reconstruction.

The methodological approach is inspired by the principles of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) developed by Hill et al. (2005, p. 198), which emphasizes triangulation of perspectives and validation by consensus among researchers. This approach allows for reconciling the richness of qualitative analysis with scientific rigor requirements adapted to psychology research standards.

Participants

The sample consists of 25 internally displaced youth aged 18 to 30, settled in the central region of Burkina Faso for at least six months. Inclusion criteria included: (1) being aged 18 to 30 at the time of the study, (2) having been forced to leave their usual place of residence due to the security crisis, (3) residing in the central region for at least six months, (4) agreeing to participate voluntarily in the study, and (5) having sufficient French proficiency to participate in an interview.

The sampling strategy adopted combines initial convenience sampling and progressive theoretical sampling, in accordance with grounded theory principles (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). Recruitment was carried out through non-governmental organizations working with displaced populations, professional training centers, and through the "snowball" technique allowing participants to recommend other people likely to participate in the study.

Sociodemographic characteristics

The sample includes 14 men and 11 women, with a mean age of 24.3 years (standard deviation = 3.7 years). The average duration of displacement is 18 months (range: 6 to 48 months). Regarding education level, 8 participants have primary level, 12 have secondary level, and 5 have higher education level. Before displacement, 15 participants were engaged in

agricultural activity, 6 were in informal trade, 3 were students, and 1 was a civil servant.

The regions of origin of participants are distributed as follows: 12 come from the Northern region, 8 from the Sahel region, 3 from the Eastern region, and 2 from the Centre-North region. This geographical diversity allows for capturing variations in displacement experiences according to local contexts of origin.

Data collection procedure

Data collection took place between January and May 2024, through individual semi-structured interviews with an average duration of 90 minutes (range: 60 to 120 minutes). Interviews were conducted in a confidential setting, either in partner organization premises or in neutral community spaces, according to participant preferences.

Interview guide

The interview guide was developed based on a literature review on identity resilience and professional reconstruction, then validated by an expert committee composed of three researchers in vocational psychology. It includes four main axes:

1. Life trajectory and displacement experience: exploration of departure context, displacement circumstances, and adaptation to the new place of residence
2. Identity and self-representations: investigation of changes in self-perception, values, and life projects
3. Professional reconstruction: analysis of strategies developed to reconstruct a professional project, obstacles encountered, and resources mobilized
4. Protective and vulnerability factors: identification of elements that facilitate or hinder identity reconstruction processes

Each axis includes main questions and follow-up prompts to deepen the themes addressed. The guide was designed flexibly to adapt to the rhythm and specificities of each participant, in accordance with semi-structured interview principles (Pin, 2023, p. 12).

Ethical considerations

This research received approval from the research ethics committee of the University of Ouagadougou. All participants gave informed consent after being informed of the study objectives, procedure, their rights, and confidentiality measures. Particular attention was paid to ethical aspects

related to the vulnerability of displaced populations, particularly in terms of respect for dignity, non-exploitation, and reciprocity.

A psychological support protocol was established in collaboration with local clinical psychologists, allowing for referring participants to specialized support in case of psychological distress revealed during interviews. No participant required this type of referral, but this precaution demonstrates the attention paid to the well-being of people involved in the research.

Data analysis procedure

Data analysis follows a thematic analysis approach inspired by the method of Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82), adapted to the specificities of research in vocational psychology. This approach allows for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) present in the data, while preserving the richness and complexity of individual experiences.

Analysis steps

1. Transcription and familiarization: all interviews were fully transcribed and anonymized. Repeated reading of transcriptions allowed for thorough familiarization with the data.
2. Initial coding: line-by-line coding was performed to identify relevant meaning units. This step generated 247 initial codes reflecting the diversity of reported experiences.
3. Theme searching: codes were grouped into potential themes according to their conceptual coherence and recurrence in the data.
4. Theme revision: themes were refined and restructured to ensure their internal coherence and mutual distinction.
5. Definition and naming: each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect its essential content.
6. Report writing: results were written by integrating illustrative interview excerpts and establishing links with existing literature.

Quality criteria

Several measures were taken to ensure the quality and rigor of the analysis (Santiago-Delefosse & Bruchez, 2015, p. 415):

- Analyst triangulation: analysis was conducted by two independent researchers, with consensus sessions to resolve interpretation divergences
- Participant validation: a subsample of 8 participants was recontacted to validate the interpretation of results (member checking)
- Audit trail: all analysis steps were documented to ensure process traceability

- Reflexivity: researchers kept a reflexive journal to document their assumptions and reactions throughout the process

Theoretical saturation was reached after analyzing 22 interviews, with the last 3 interviews not bringing significant new elements. This saturation testifies to the sufficiency of the sample to meet the research objectives.

Results

Thematic analysis of the interviews identified three central processes in the identity and professional reconstruction of internally displaced youth: (1) narrative reappropriation of life trajectory, (2) creative adaptation to new opportunities, and (3) mobilization of community and family resources. These processes articulate in a dynamic and non-linear manner, with each participant developing a unique combination of adaptive strategies according to their personal and social context.

Theme 1: Narrative reappropriation of life trajectory Reconstruction of experience meaning

The first identified process concerns the capacity of displaced youth to reconstruct a narrative coherence of their life trajectory, integrating the traumatic experience of displacement into a broader life narrative. This narrative reappropriation constitutes a fundamental mechanism of identity resilience, allowing for transforming a suffered rupture into a significant stage of personal development.

Amadou, 26 years old, former farmer from the Northern region, illustrates this process:

"At first, I told myself that my life was over, that everything I had built was lost. But with time, I understood that this ordeal also taught me things. Now, I tell myself that I am someone who survived the war, who knew how to adapt. It's a strength I didn't know before."

This narrative reconstruction is often accompanied by a reevaluation of priorities and values. Participants develop an expanded temporal perspective that allows them to envision displacement no longer as an end, but as a transition toward new possibilities.

Integration of "Survivor" identity

A particularly salient aspect of this narrative reappropriation concerns the integration of "survivor" or "resilient" identity into self-conception. This

new identity facet becomes an important psychological resource for facing the challenges of professional reconstruction.

Fatimata, 23 years old, former trader, expresses this transformation:

"Before, I saw myself just as a small village trader. Now, I know that I am capable of starting from scratch, of adapting to any situation. This self-confidence, I didn't have it before displacement."

This integration of adverse experience as a source of personal strength constitutes an important protective factor against risks of psychological decompensation and facilitates engagement in new professional projects.

Theme 2: Creative adaptation to new opportunities

Professional reconversion as adaptation strategy

The second central process concerns the capacity of displaced youth to identify and seize new professional opportunities in their host environment. This adaptation is not limited to simple activity substitution, but often involves genuine reconversion that mobilizes transferable skills and develops new ones.

Ibrahim, 28 years old, former herder who became a motorcycle mechanic, describes this transformation:

"When I arrived here, there was no possibility of herding like in the village. But I was always good with my hands, I already repaired agricultural equipment. I started observing the mechanics in the neighborhood, then I asked to learn. Now, I have my own activity."

This creative adaptation capacity relies on several factors: cognitive flexibility, openness to new learning, and the ability to identify transferable skills from one domain to another.

Innovation in subsistence strategies

Participants often develop innovative strategies to generate income, combining several activities or creating new economic niches. This diversification of income sources constitutes both an economic survival strategy and a means of identity reconstruction.

Aïcha, 25 years old, illustrates this creativity:

"I started by selling vegetables at the market, like I did in the village. Then I noticed that many displaced women didn't know where to buy certain products from their region. I

created a small network to bring these products and resell them. Now, I train other women to do the same."

This innovation in subsistence strategies testifies to a remarkable capacity for agency, allowing displaced youth to move beyond victim status to become actors in their own reconstruction.

Acquisition of new skills

Adaptation to new opportunities is often accompanied by significant investment in acquiring new skills, whether technical, linguistic, or relational. This learning approach constitutes a key factor in professional identity reconstruction.

Moussa, 24 years old, former cultivator who became a phone credit seller, testifies:

"Here in the city, you have to know how to count quickly, talk with customers, use new technologies. At first, it was difficult, but I learned. Now, I feel more modern, more adapted to today's world."

This acquisition of new skills is not limited to their utilitarian dimension, but contributes to a deeper transformation of professional and social identity.

Theme 3: Mobilization of community and family resources

Role of social support in reconstruction

The third central process concerns the active mobilization of social resources available in the host environment. This mobilization is not limited to passive reception of aid, but involves a proactive approach to building social networks and reciprocity.

Salif, 27 years old, explains the importance of these networks:

"When you arrive somewhere with nothing, it's relationships that count. I first looked for people from my region who were already there. They helped me understand how it works here, where to find work. Now, I'm the one helping new arrivals."

This dimension of reciprocity in helping relationships constitutes an important element in reconstructing self-esteem and personal dignity.

Adaptation to local sociocultural codes

Mobilizing community resources often requires adaptation to the sociocultural codes of the host environment. This adaptation represents a

particular challenge for youth from rural areas who find themselves in urban settings.

Mariam, 22 years old, describes this adaptation:

"In the village, everyone knows each other, relationships are different. Here in the city, you have to learn the codes, how to dress, how to talk to people. It's like learning a new culture, even though we're in the same country."

This cultural adaptation constitutes a complex process that can be a source of stress but also personal enrichment and horizon broadening.

Intergenerational transmission and family responsibility

A particularly significant aspect concerns the role of displaced youth in intergenerational transmission and their responsibility toward their family. Many perceive themselves as "pioneers" charged with opening the way for other family members.

Ousmane, 29 years old, expresses this responsibility:

"I can't fail because my whole family is counting on me. I have to show that it's possible to make it here, so that my little brothers can also come to study or work. It's pressure, but it's also what gives me the strength to continue."

This dimension of family responsibility constitutes both a stress factor and an important source of motivation in identity reconstruction processes.

Transversal factors influencing reconstruction

Temporality and non-linear processes

Analysis reveals that identity and professional reconstruction does not follow a linear process, but is characterized by phases of advances and setbacks, doubts and confirmations. Temporality plays a crucial role, with the first months generally marked by immediate survival, while longer-term projects emerge progressively.

Gender and trajectory specificities

Results highlight significant differences according to gender in reconstruction strategies. Women tend to favor commercial activities and female networks, while men orient more toward technical and artisanal trades. These differences reflect both sociocultural constraints and specific opportunities available according to gender.

Education level and adaptation capacities

Initial education level significantly influences adaptation capacities and reconstruction strategies. Participants with higher education levels generally show greater flexibility in their reconversion strategies and better ability to navigate institutional systems.

These results reveal the complexity and richness of identity reconstruction processes among internally displaced youth, highlighting their remarkable capacity for resilience and creative adaptation in the face of adversity.

Discussion

This qualitative study provides original insight into the processes of identity resilience and professional reconstruction among internally displaced youth in Burkina Faso. The results reveal complex adaptive mechanisms that go far beyond a simple survival reaction to constitute genuine processes of identity transformation and personal development. This discussion examines these results in light of existing literature and explores their theoretical and practical implications.

Narrative reappropriation and identity reconstruction

The narrative reappropriation process identified in this study echoes the work of McAdams (2001, p. 115) on narrative identity and that of Dubar (1998, p. 102) on professional identity reconstruction. The capacity of displaced youth to integrate the traumatic experience of displacement into a coherent life narrative constitutes a fundamental mechanism of identity resilience, confirming the theoretical propositions of Cyrulnik (2001, p. 78) on resilience as a narrative process.

This narrative reappropriation presents specificities linked to the context of forced displacement. Unlike voluntary professional transitions studied by Masdonati and Rossier (2016, p. 280), displacement imposes a brutal rupture that requires more radical reconstruction mechanisms. Participants in this study develop what we propose to call a "resilient survivor identity," which transforms adverse experience into positive identity resource.

This identity transformation is in line with the work of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, p. 12) on post-traumatic growth, but presents specific characteristics linked to the Burkinabè sociocultural context. The cultural valorization of resistance in the face of adversity and traditional models of community resilience facilitate this positive integration of traumatic experience.

Creative adaptation and agency

The creative adaptation process observed among participants remarkably illustrates the concept of agency developed by Bandura (2006, p. 315) in his social cognitive theory. Displaced youth do not merely endure their situation, but develop proactive strategies that testify to a capacity for action on their environment and professional future.

This adaptive creativity presents similarities with the mechanisms of "identity bricolage" described by Lévi-Strauss (1962, p. 26) and taken up by Dubar (2000, p. 145) in the context of professional identity construction. Participants mobilize available resources in their new environment to construct new identity and professional configurations, demonstrating remarkable cognitive flexibility.

Innovation in subsistence strategies also reveals processes of necessity entrepreneurship that align with the analyses of Reynolds et al. (2005, p. 218) on entrepreneurship in constraint contexts. However, our results suggest that this entrepreneurship goes beyond simple economic necessity to become a vector of identity reconstruction and self-esteem development.

Social resource mobilization and social capital

The mobilization of community and family resources observed in this study confirms the importance of social capital in resilience processes, as shown by the work of Putnam (2000, p. 19) and Coleman (1988, p. S98). However, our results reveal specificities linked to the displacement context and Burkinabè culture.

The dimension of reciprocity in helping relationships constitutes a particularly significant element. Participants do not merely receive help, but actively engage in mutual aid relationships that contribute to reconstructing their dignity and self-esteem. This reciprocity echoes the analyses of Mauss (1925, p. 147) on gift and counter-gift, but is actualized in the specific context of forced migration.

Adaptation to local sociocultural codes reveals processes of selective acculturation that align with Berry's (1997, p. 9) models on acculturation strategies. Participants develop intercultural competencies that allow them to navigate between their culture of origin and that of their host environment, creating hybrid identities particularly adapted to their situation.

Protective and vulnerability factors

Analysis of transversal factors reveals the importance of several variables in identity reconstruction processes. Education level appears as a major protective factor, confirming results from previous research on resilience (Masten, 2001, p. 235). However, our results nuance this

relationship by showing that formal education is not the only determinant of adaptation capacity.

Gender differences observed in reconstruction strategies reflect constraints and opportunities specific to traditional social roles. These results align with feminist analyses on resilience that emphasize the importance of taking gender specificities into account in the study of adaptive processes (Gilligan, 1982, p. 173).

The non-linear temporality of reconstruction processes constitutes an important result that challenges sequential models of adaptation to change. Our results rather suggest a cyclical model where phases of progression and regression alternate according to challenges encountered and available resources.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to enriching theoretical models of identity resilience in crisis contexts. It proposes an integrative model that articulates three central processes: narrative reappropriation, creative adaptation, and social resource mobilization. This model goes beyond individualizing approaches to resilience to integrate social and cultural dimensions of adaptive processes.

The notion of "resilient survivor identity" that we propose enriches existing conceptualizations of professional identity by integrating the dimension of adverse experience transformed into resource. This conceptualization could be relevant for other populations confronted with major biographical ruptures.

The study also emphasizes the importance of developing culturally situated theoretical approaches to resilience. The mechanisms identified among Burkinabè youth are rooted in specific values and cultural practices that cannot be neglected in understanding adaptive processes.

Practical implications

The results of this study offer several avenues for developing support programs for internally displaced youth. First, the importance of narrative reappropriation suggests the interest of therapeutic approaches centered on life narrative reconstruction, such as narrative therapy developed by White and Epston (1990, p. 29).

Second, the adaptive creativity observed among participants argues for flexible professional training programs that valorize transferable skills and encourage innovation. These programs should go beyond simple technical skill transmission to include agency and self-confidence development.

Third, the importance of social resources suggests the interest of programs that facilitate social network creation and existing social capital mobilization. These programs could include peer mentoring devices and intercommunity meeting spaces.

Limitations and research perspectives

This study presents several limitations that must be taken into account in interpreting results. First, the sample, although diversified, remains limited to the central region of Burkina Faso and does not allow for generalizing results to all displaced youth in the country or other contexts.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow for capturing the temporal evolution of reconstruction processes. Longitudinal studies would be necessary to better understand the dynamics of these processes over the long term.

Third, the qualitative approach, although adapted to the study objectives, does not allow for quantifying the relative importance of different identified factors. Mixed studies combining qualitative and quantitative approaches could enrich understanding of these phenomena.

Future research perspectives include extending this study to other regions and contexts, developing identity resilience measurement tools adapted to the Burkinabè context, and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions based on the results of this research.

Conclusion

This study reveals the remarkable capacity for resilience and adaptation of internally displaced youth in Burkina Faso. Far from being simple passive victims of the security crisis, these young people develop creative and proactive strategies for identity and professional reconstruction that testify to their agency and development potential.

The identified processes - narrative reappropriation, creative adaptation, and social resource mobilization - constitute fundamental mechanisms of identity resilience that could be relevant for other populations confronted with major biographical ruptures. This research thus contributes to a better understanding of identity reconstruction processes in crisis contexts and offers promising perspectives for psychological support and professional integration of displaced populations.

The qualitative approach adopted has allowed for capturing the complexity and richness of these processes, emphasizing the importance of research methods adapted to the study of complex human phenomena. This study argues for an approach to resilience that goes beyond individualizing models to integrate social, cultural, and contextual dimensions of adaptive processes.

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