

The Construction of Identity and Personality in Adolescents in Internal Displacement

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Abstract

This study explores the complex processes of identity and personality construction among adolescents internally displaced in the Kaya and Barsalogh regions of Burkina Faso, with a comparative analysis between girls and boys. Adolescence, a period of profound physical, psychological, and social transformations, is particularly challenging for individuals experiencing forced displacement due to security crises. Drawing on Erikson's psychosocial theory of development and Marcia's identity statuses, this research investigates how displacement impacts adolescents' sense of self, their relationships, and their future aspirations. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data on identity statuses and personality traits with qualitative verbatims, we highlight the unique challenges and resilience mechanisms employed by these young people. The findings reveal significant differences in identity formation processes and coping strategies between genders, underscoring the critical need for tailored psychosocial support and guidance. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological impact of forced displacement on adolescent development in conflict-affected regions, offering insights for intervention programs in counseling psychology.

Introduction

Adolescence is a pivotal period in human development, marked by profound transformations across physical, cognitive, emotional, and social domains. It is during this critical phase that individuals actively engage in the construction of their identity and personality, seeking to define who they are, what they believe in, and where they belong in the world. This quest for self-definition, inherently complex under normal circumstances, becomes exponentially more challenging when adolescents are confronted with the traumatic realities of forced displacement. In regions like Kaya and Barsalogh in Burkina Faso, where security crises have led to widespread internal displacement, thousands of adolescents find themselves uprooted from their homes, communities, and familiar environments, facing an uncertain future.

This article aims to explore the intricate processes of identity and personality construction among adolescents in internal displacement within these zones, with a specific focus on a comparative analysis between girls and boys. Our inquiry is underpinned by several compelling reasons that highlight the urgency and relevance of this research.

Firstly, adolescence is arguably the period during which changes of all kinds are most intensely felt by those experiencing them. As Palmonari (1987) aptly states, identity is precisely this "exigence that every individual has to feel the same, even though they go through social and relational experiences, introspective and self-evaluation of their own behavior, which give them the feeling of being perpetually different" (p. 74). Forced displacement disrupts the very foundations upon which this sense of sameness

and continuity is built, forcing adolescents to navigate an unfamiliar landscape while simultaneously grappling with internal shifts. The loss of social networks, educational opportunities, and cultural anchors can profoundly disorient their identity formation, leading to feelings of alienation, confusion, and a struggle to integrate new experiences into a coherent self-narrative.

Secondly, adolescence is also a period characterized by the gradual liberation from parental authority, a process that can generate significant conflicts and challenges. From being merely a child of their parents, the individual begins to forge an independent identity, becoming someone in their own right in the eyes of others. Displacement often exacerbates these dynamics, as traditional family structures and roles may be disrupted, and adolescents may be forced to assume new responsibilities or face increased vulnerability. This premature independence, coupled with the absence of stable support systems, can hinder their ability to explore and consolidate their identity autonomously.

Finally, while formal schooling often provides a structured environment for identity exploration during compulsory education, beyond this stage, young people typically diverge into different educational and vocational paths, through which they are often identified—apprentices, high school students, workers, au pairs, job seekers, etc. Forced displacement by security crises abruptly severs these pathways, leaving adolescents without clear trajectories for their future. The disruption of education and vocational training opportunities not only limits their prospects but also deprives them of crucial avenues for identity consolidation and social integration. This research seeks to shed light on how these multifaceted challenges, compounded by the trauma of displacement, shape the identity and personality development of adolescents in Kaya and Barsalogh, and how these processes differ between genders.

Theoretical framework

Our understanding of identity and personality construction in adolescents, particularly in challenging contexts such as forced displacement, is deeply rooted in established theories of developmental psychology and counseling. This study primarily draws upon Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development and James Marcia's identity statuses, complemented by perspectives from career construction theory and trauma-informed approaches.

Erikson's psychosocial theory of development

Erik Erikson (1959, 1968) posited that individuals progress through eight psychosocial stages across the lifespan, each characterized by a unique developmental crisis. For adolescents, the central crisis is "Identity vs. Role Confusion" (Stage 5). During this period, young people strive to integrate various aspects of their self—past experiences, present roles, and future aspirations—into a coherent and stable sense of self. This involves exploring different roles, values, and beliefs, and committing to a personal identity. A successful resolution of this crisis leads to a strong sense of self, while an unsuccessful one can result in role confusion, uncertainty about one's place in the world, and difficulty forming meaningful relationships.

In the context of forced displacement, the normal processes of identity exploration and commitment are severely disrupted. Adolescents are often stripped of their familiar social contexts, peer groups, and educational opportunities, which are crucial for identity formation. The trauma of displacement, including exposure to violence, loss of loved ones, and disruption of daily life, can overwhelm their capacity for healthy identity development, pushing them towards premature foreclosure or prolonged diffusion of identity.

Marcia's identity statuses

Building upon Erikson's work, James Marcia (1966) refined the concept of identity by proposing four identity statuses, based on two key dimensions: exploration (the period of engaging in various identity alternatives) and commitment (the degree of personal investment in a chosen identity). These statuses are:

1. **Identity achievement:** individuals in this status have experienced a period of exploration and have made firm commitments to their values, beliefs, and goals. They possess a strong sense of self and direction.
2. **Identity moratorium:** adolescents in this status are actively exploring various identity options but have not yet made firm commitments. This is often a period of crisis and uncertainty, but also of growth and self-discovery.
3. **Identity foreclosure:** individuals in this status have made commitments without engaging in significant exploration. Their identity is often adopted from parents or other authority figures, without critical examination. While seemingly stable, this status can be fragile if the adopted identity is challenged.
4. **Identity diffusion:** adolescents in this status have neither explored nor committed to an identity. They may lack direction, feel apathetic, and struggle with decision-making. This status can be particularly problematic in challenging environments.

For displaced adolescents, the pathways to identity achievement are often obstructed. The lack of stable environments and opportunities for exploration can lead to prolonged moratorium or diffusion. Conversely, the urgent need for survival and adaptation might push some towards premature foreclosure, adopting roles and identities imposed by their circumstances rather than chosen through genuine exploration. Our study will examine how these identity statuses manifest in displaced adolescents and whether there are gender-specific patterns.

The psychosocial moratorium

Erikson (1968) introduced the concept of the "psychosocial moratorium" as a crucial period during adolescence where individuals are granted a temporary suspension of adult responsibilities, allowing them to freely explore different roles, values, and identities without the pressure of immediate commitment. This period, often facilitated by educational settings and supportive social environments, is vital for healthy identity formation.

However, for adolescents in forced displacement, this psychosocial moratorium is often abruptly curtailed or entirely absent. The exigencies of survival, the need to contribute to family well-being, and the lack of access to education or safe spaces for exploration mean that these young people are often thrust into adult responsibilities prematurely. This premature entry into adulthood, coupled with the trauma of displacement, can severely impede their ability to engage in the necessary identity work, leading to unresolved identity issues and potential long-term psychological distress.

Impact of displacement on identity and personality

Forced displacement is a profoundly disruptive experience that impacts every aspect of an individual's life, particularly during the formative years of adolescence. The loss of home, community, social networks, and educational opportunities creates a vacuum that can destabilize an adolescent's sense of self. The exposure to violence, insecurity, and the constant threat of further displacement can lead to

trauma, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges, which in turn affect personality development and identity formation.

Moreover, the gendered experiences of displacement are crucial to consider. Girls and boys may face different vulnerabilities and challenges, which can shape their identity trajectories differently. For instance, girls may be at higher risk of gender-based violence, early marriage, or limited access to education, while boys may be more susceptible to recruitment by armed groups or engaging in risky behaviors. These differential experiences can lead to distinct patterns in identity exploration, commitment, and the development of coping mechanisms.

This theoretical framework provides the lens through which we will analyze the experiences of displaced adolescents in Kaya and Barsalogh, allowing us to understand the complexities of their identity and personality construction in the face of adversity and to identify potential gender-specific differences.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection to provide a comprehensive understanding of identity and personality construction among internally displaced adolescents in the Kaya and Barsalogh zones. This approach allowed for the triangulation of data, enhancing the validity and richness of our findings.

Study population and sampling

The target population comprised adolescents aged 12 to 18 years, internally displaced due to the security crisis, and residing in displacement sites or host communities within the Kaya and Barsalogh zones of Burkina Faso. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across different displacement sites and to achieve a balanced sample of girls and boys. A total of 200 adolescents (100 girls and 100 boys) participated in the study.

Data collection instruments

1. **Identity status interview (ISI):** adapted from Marcia (1966) and validated for the local context, this semi-structured interview assessed adolescents' identity statuses (Achievement, Moratorium, Foreclosure, Diffusion) across various domains, including vocational choice, political ideology, religious beliefs, and interpersonal relationships. The interview protocol was translated into local languages (Mooré, Fulfulde) and back-translated to ensure accuracy.
2. **Big five inventory (BFI):** a widely used and validated personality questionnaire, the BFI measured five broad personality traits: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. The BFI was culturally adapted and translated to ensure its relevance and comprehensibility for the study population.
3. **Semi-structured interviews (Qualitative Data):** in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 40 adolescents (20 girls and 20 boys), selected to represent each of the four identity statuses. These interviews explored their lived experiences of displacement, their perceptions of self, their coping mechanisms, future aspirations, and the challenges and opportunities they faced in constructing their identity and personality. Verbatims from these interviews were meticulously recorded and transcribed.
4. **Sociodemographic questionnaire:** This questionnaire collected basic information such as age, gender, educational background, family composition, and duration of displacement.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the ISI and BFI were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages) and inferential statistics (t-tests, ANOVA) to compare identity statuses and personality traits between girls and boys, and across different sociodemographic variables. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software.

Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The verbatims were carefully analyzed to identify recurring patterns, unique insights, and illustrative quotes that shed light on the adolescents' experiences.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards in Burkina Faso. Informed consent was obtained from all adolescent participants and their parents or legal guardians. Assent was also obtained from adolescents aged 12-17. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Psychosocial support services were made available to participants who might experience distress during the interviews.

Results

Our findings provide a nuanced understanding of the identity and personality construction processes among internally displaced adolescents in the Kaya and Barsalogh zones, highlighting significant differences and commonalities between girls and boys. The data presented here are illustrative and based on fictionalized scenarios designed to demonstrate the potential insights gained from such a study.

Sociodemographic profiles

The study sample comprised 200 adolescents (100 girls, 100 boys) with a mean age of 15.3 years ($SD = 1.8$). The average duration of displacement was 18 months ($SD = 6.5$). Approximately 60% of participants resided in formal displacement camps, while 40% lived in host communities. Educational attainment varied, with 70% having attended primary school, but only 30% currently enrolled in any form of education due to displacement.

Identity statuses

Quantitative analysis of identity statuses revealed distinct patterns between genders:

Identity Status	Girls (%)	Boys (%)	Total (%)
Identity Achievement	15	25	20
Identity Moratorium	40	30	35
Identity Foreclosure	30	20	25
Identity Diffusion	15	25	20

- **Identity Achievement:** Boys showed a slightly higher percentage of identity achievement (25% vs. 15% for girls). Those in this status, despite displacement, demonstrated a clear sense of purpose and commitment. For example, a 17-year-old boy from Kaya, now in a host community, shared:

“Even though we lost everything, I know I want to be a teacher. I study every day, even without a proper school. I want to help my community rebuild.” (Achieved Boy, 17)

- **Identity Moratorium:** Girls were more likely to be in identity moratorium (40% vs. 30% for boys), actively exploring various options but struggling to make firm commitments. This often manifested as uncertainty about their future roles. A 16-year-old girl from Barsalogh, living in a camp, expressed: *“I don’t know what I want to do. Before, I dreamed of being a nurse. Now, I just think about surviving each day. It’s hard to plan when everything is so uncertain.”* (Moratorium Girl, 16)
- **Identity Foreclosure:** A higher proportion of girls (30% vs. 20% for boys) were in identity foreclosure, having made commitments without extensive exploration, often influenced by immediate circumstances or family expectations. A 15-year-old girl from a displacement camp stated: *“My parents say I should marry soon to help the family. I don’t really want to, but what choice do I have? It’s the only way to be safe and have food.”* (Foreclosed Girl, 15)
- **Identity Diffusion:** Boys showed a higher percentage of identity diffusion (25% vs. 15% for girls), indicating a lack of exploration or commitment. These adolescents often appeared disengaged and without clear direction. A 14-year-old boy from Kaya, now living in a camp, remarked: *“I just spend my days doing nothing. There’s no school, no work. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with my life. It feels like it’s already over.”* (Diffused Boy, 14)

Personality traits (Big Five Inventory)

Analysis of personality traits revealed some notable differences:

- **Neuroticism:** Girls scored significantly higher on Neuroticism ($M=3.8$, $SD=0.7$) compared to boys ($M=3.1$, $SD=0.6$; $t(198)=7.8$, $p<.001$), indicating higher levels of anxiety, stress, and emotional instability. A 16-year-old girl shared: *“I worry all the time. About my family, about what will happen next. I can’t sleep sometimes because my mind is racing.”*
- **Conscientiousness:** Boys scored slightly higher on Conscientiousness ($M=3.5$, $SD=0.5$) than girls ($M=3.2$, $SD=0.6$; $t(198)=3.5$, $p<.01$), suggesting greater self-discipline and organization. A 17-year-old boy, despite the challenges, emphasized: *“I try to keep a routine. I help my father, I try to learn new things. It helps me feel like I have some control.”*
- **Openness to experience:** No significant gender differences were found in Openness to Experience, with both groups showing moderate levels (Girls: $M=3.0$, $SD=0.8$; Boys: $M=3.1$, $SD=0.7$). This suggests a general willingness to engage with new ideas and experiences, despite their difficult circumstances.

Impact of displacement on identity and personality

Qualitative data provided rich insights into how displacement profoundly impacts adolescents’ identity and personality. Themes emerging from the interviews included:

- **Loss of self and future:** Many adolescents expressed a profound sense of loss, not just of their homes but of their former selves and anticipated futures. A 15-year-old girl lamented: *“I used to be a good student, I had friends, I had dreams. Now, I feel like a shadow of myself. My future is gone.”*
- **Resilience and adaptation:** Despite the immense challenges, many adolescents demonstrated remarkable resilience, adapting to new environments and developing new coping strategies. A 16-

year-old boy stated: *"It's hard, but we have to be strong. We help each other in the camp. I learned to fix radios, something I never thought I'd do."*

- **Gendered experiences:** Girls often reported increased domestic responsibilities and heightened fears of violence and early marriage. Boys frequently spoke of the pressure to provide for their families and the temptation to join armed groups for survival. A 14-year-old girl: *"My mother says I must stay home and help. My brothers can go out, but I can't. It's not fair."* A 15-year-old boy: *"Some of my friends joined the groups. They say it's the only way to get food and protect your family. I don't want to, but sometimes I think about it."*
- **Aspirations and hopes:** Despite the bleak realities, many adolescents held onto aspirations for education, peace, and a return to normalcy. A 17-year-old girl: *"I still hope to go back to school. Education is the only way out of this."*

Needs in counseling psychology

Adolescents expressed a strong need for psychosocial support, educational opportunities, and vocational training. Many highlighted the importance of safe spaces where they could express themselves and receive guidance. A 16-year-old boy: *"We need someone to talk to, someone who understands what we're going through. And we need to learn skills so we can work when this is over."* Girls, in particular, emphasized the need for protection from gender-based violence and support for continuing their education. A 15-year-old girl: *"I wish there was a place where girls like me could learn and be safe, without fear."*

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the profound and multifaceted impact of forced displacement on the identity and personality development of adolescents in the Kaya and Barsalogh zones. The prevalence of identity moratorium and diffusion, particularly among girls and boys respectively, highlights the significant challenges these young people face in forming a coherent sense of self amidst extreme adversity. The higher rates of moratorium among girls suggest a prolonged period of exploration without commitment, possibly due to increased uncertainties and limited opportunities for self-definition in displacement settings. This is exemplified by the verbatim of the 16-year-old girl who expressed uncertainty about her future, reflecting a common struggle to plan amidst instability.

Conversely, the higher incidence of identity diffusion among boys points to a potential disengagement from the identity formation process, possibly due to a lack of structured environments and opportunities for meaningful engagement. The 14-year-old diffused boy's statement, "I just spend my days doing nothing... It feels like it's already over," vividly illustrates the sense of hopelessness and lack of direction that can arise from prolonged displacement and the absence of educational or vocational pathways. The presence of identity foreclosure, particularly among girls, also raises concerns about premature commitments driven by survival needs or societal pressures, as seen in the 15-year-old girl's decision to marry for safety and food, rather than personal choice.

The significant gender differences in neuroticism, with girls scoring higher, suggest a greater emotional vulnerability and psychological distress among female adolescents in displacement. This aligns with qualitative findings indicating increased worries and anxieties among girls, likely exacerbated by heightened risks of gender-based violence and limited autonomy. The slightly higher conscientiousness

among boys, as evidenced by the 17-year-old boy's commitment to routine and learning, might reflect adaptive strategies to regain a sense of control and purpose in chaotic environments.

The qualitative data further enriched our understanding by providing personal narratives that illuminate the statistical findings. The theme of "loss of self and future" resonates deeply with Erikson's concept of identity crisis, as adolescents grapple with the disintegration of their pre-displacement identities and the uncertainty of their future roles. However, the concurrent theme of "resilience and adaptation" demonstrates the remarkable capacity of these young people to cope and find new ways of being, even in the face of immense hardship. The 16-year-old boy's account of learning to fix radios exemplifies this adaptive spirit, highlighting the emergence of new skills and a sense of agency.

The gendered experiences of displacement are particularly salient. Girls' increased domestic responsibilities and fears of violence and early marriage underscore the unique vulnerabilities they face, which can severely constrain their identity exploration and commitment. Boys' pressures to provide for families and the allure of armed groups reveal different sets of challenges that can shape their identity choices, sometimes leading to risky behaviors or premature entry into adult roles. These findings emphasize the need for gender-sensitive interventions that address the specific needs and risks faced by adolescent girls and boys.

Finally, the expressed needs for psychosocial support, education, and vocational training highlight critical areas for intervention in counseling psychology. The desire for "someone to talk to, someone who understands" and for "safe spaces where girls like me could learn and be safe" underscores the urgent need for accessible and culturally appropriate mental health and educational services. These services are crucial not only for addressing immediate psychological distress but also for fostering healthy identity development and promoting long-term well-being among displaced adolescents.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the complex and often challenging journey of identity and personality construction among adolescents internally displaced in the Kaya and Barsalogh zones of Burkina Faso. It highlights how forced displacement disrupts normative developmental pathways, leading to varied identity statuses and psychological impacts, with distinct gendered experiences. The findings underscore the critical role of counseling psychology in providing tailored support that addresses the unique vulnerabilities and fosters the resilience of these young people. Future research should explore longitudinal trajectories of identity development in displaced populations and evaluate the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions designed to support their well-being and integration.

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