

Original Article

Professional Identity Construction and Reflexive Resilience among Future Educational and Vocational Psychologists in Burkina Faso's Security Crisis

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Abstract

The security crisis in Burkina Faso has severely disrupted the educational system, confronting future psychologists with an early and intense gap between their academic professional ideals and the harsh realities of crisis-affected communities. This study explores how psychology students construct their professional identity in this context, with particular attention to processes of identity negotiation, reflexive adaptation, and awareness of occupational mental health risks. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 final-year Master's students in educational and vocational psychology. Reflexive thematic analysis generated five main themes: tension between pedagogical humanism and security realism; identity reconstruction as a dynamic adaptation strategy in contexts of displacement; development of reflexive resilience combining adaptability with critical consciousness; deep dissonance between training and field needs, particularly regarding professional autonomy, competence development, and peer support; and early anticipation of vicarious trauma with the need for preventive preparation. The findings suggest that students developed a form of critical adaptability that actively negotiates with environmental constraints rather than passively accepting them. This study highlights significant gaps between theoretical training and field realities and discusses implications for training in educational and vocational psychology, emphasizing the urgent need to integrate preparation for trauma management, strengthen support for autonomy and competence, and establish peer

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supervision structures that sustain professional well-being and effectiveness.

Keywords: crisis context, educational and vocational psychology, professional identity construction, reflexive resilience, training-field dissonance, vicarious trauma

1. Introduction

The security crisis that began in Burkina Faso in 2015 has profoundly destabilized the social fabric and, most acutely, the educational system. With over two million internally displaced persons and thousands of schools closed (UNICEF, 2024; OCHA, 2025), the role of education and the professionals who deliver it has been radically transformed.

In this context, the training of educational and vocational psychologists takes on critical importance. This study focuses on the professional identity construction of final-year Master's students at Kaya University Center, an institution located at the heart of the crisis-affected region. We hypothesized that these students experience an "anticipated reality shock" (Kramer, 1974), an early and intense confrontation between their professional ideals shaped by academic training and the harshness of the field realities.

The research examines how these future practitioners negotiate, adapt, and critique disciplinary knowledge to prepare for intervention in emergency contexts. Three complementary theoretical lenses illuminate the processes at work: Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) and Marcia's (1966) identity status model for the identity dimension, a transactional and ecological perspective on resilience (Ungar, 2023); Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to analyze the frustration of basic psychological needs; and the concept of vicarious trauma (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995) to explore students' anticipation of psychosocial risks

2. Methodology

A qualitative, inductive, and interpretative approach was adopted to gain a deep understanding of the meanings participants attributed to their training experiences and professional anticipations. This interpretative stance acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and that understanding social phenomena requires interpretation of the meanings actors assign to them.

The sample consisted of 18 students (11 women, 7 men; mean age = 26.4 years, SD = 2.1) in the final year of a Master's program in psychology, specializing in "Education and Vocational Guidance," at Kaya University Center. The choice of this site was strategic given its direct exposure to the security crisis.

Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes (range: 40–50 minutes) were conducted between September and November 2024. The interview guide explored participants’ perceptions of the psychologist’s role in crisis contexts, theoretical models judged relevant or inadequate, anticipated adaptation strategies, and reflections on their own career development. Interviews were recorded with consent and fully transcribed.

Reflexive thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2019), was implemented. This six-phase process enabled the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within the data. Consistent with the constructivist orientation of this approach, emphasis was placed on researcher subjectivity as an analytical resource rather than a bias to be minimized. The primary researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the process to document interpretive decisions and monitor potential biases. All authors participated iteratively in the refinement of themes. Data collection continued until thematic sufficiency was reached, that is, a level of interpretive depth judged sufficient to address the research questions.

The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Kaya University Center. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was ensured through the use of codes (E01 to E18). Data were stored securely in accordance with confidentiality standards.

3. Results

Reflexive thematic analysis of the interviews generated five main themes illustrating how educational and vocational psychology students construct their professional identity in the face of crisis. These themes highlight a constant dialectic between theoretical frameworks from training and the pragmatic realities of an emergency field.

3.1 Theme 1: “Pedagogical survival” – Oscillation between humanistic ideals and security constraints

The first theme highlighted a fundamental tension in participants’ relationship to their future profession. Students expressed a deep attachment to a humanistic ideal centered on student flourishing and potential, a core principle of educational psychology. However, this ideal clashed directly with the security realism imposed by the context. Participants described a transformation in their role perception, shifting from a development facilitator to an emergency and security manager.

In first year, we talked about Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development... That was our profession. Today, I mostly think about how to do psychological debriefing after an attack. Priority is survival, not development. (E07)

This quote illustrates a particularly intense “anticipated reality shock” (Kramer, 1974), where development and learning models appear secondary to immediate protection imperatives.

3.2 Theme 2: “Identity bricolage” – A career strategy in displacement contexts

Facing the collapse of traditional social structures, students anticipated “identity bricolage” work (Côté & Levine, 2002), both for themselves and for the young people they will accompany. This concept took on concrete and urgent dimensions. Students perceived that their role would not be to help youth construct linear life trajectories, but rather to support them in navigating multiple and sometimes contradictory identities (displaced person, student, member of a broken community).

Life projects, projecting into the future... that’s a luxury. Our work will be helping young people be someone solid, here and now, even if everything is broken around them. (E15)

This pragmatic approach to fragmented identities evokes, within our theoretical framework, navigation between the identity statuses described by Marcia (1966). However, participants themselves did not explicitly articulate this shifting in terms of Marcia’s model; the connection remains a theoretical overlay applied to their accounts of context-driven adaptation.

3.3 Theme 3: “Reflexive resilience” – Beyond career adaptability

A particularly salient concept emerged from the discourse: a form of resilience we termed “reflexive.” Unlike simple adaptation or endurance, this resilience integrated a critical dimension. Students affirmed their willingness to adapt but refused for this adaptation to mean passive acceptance of degraded conditions. This stance aligned with a transactional view of resilience (Ungar, 2023), in which the individual actively negotiates with the environment to secure resources.

Adaptability, yes, we talk about it in Savickas courses. But it’s not about bending to everything. It’s about knowing when to bend and when to fight for conditions to change. That’s being a professional, isn’t it? (E11)

This reflexive resilience appeared as a career meta-competence that protects future professionals from burnout by maintaining their capacity to act upon the system rather than merely endure it.

3.4 Theme 4: Cognitive dissonance and frustration of vocational needs

Dissonance between training and field realities was analyzed through Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Students expressed profound frustration of their needs for competence, autonomy, and social relatedness. This frustration was experienced not only as an obstacle to well-being but as a direct threat to professional development and motivation.

Frustration of competence need. Participants criticized the perceived inadequacy of theoretical tools when faced with the complexity of trauma in the field.

We talk about the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky... But when you have 45 students in a class, half have lost a parent, and you also need to check there are no mines around the school... how do you apply that? I feel incompetent. The tools we were given aren't at the right scale. (E12)

Frustration of autonomy need. Students experienced major constraints from rigid emergency protocols that limited their capacity to exercise professional initiative.

We're told: 'You're psychologists, you're trained, use clinical judgment.' But as soon as you're in the field, it's 'No, you do it this way, follow protocol, no deviation.' Where's my professional freedom? I'm just an executor, not a professional. (E05)

Frustration of social relatedness need. Participants expressed a vital need for peer support and supervision to avoid isolation when facing anticipated distress. However, they perceived a glaring lack of adapted support structures.

We talk about the importance of clinical supervision and teamwork. But once in the field, you're alone. No supervisor, no colleagues to debrief with. You go home with all that in your head and manage alone. (E08)

3.5 Theme 5: Anticipation of vicarious trauma as a professionalization issue

A major theme was the early and acute awareness of psychosocial risks, particularly vicarious trauma. Students verbalized fear of “compassion fatigue” and anticipated the impact of continuous exposure to suffering on their own mental health and worldview.

We prepare to hear terrible stories. But who will prepare us to carry them? If we don't think about this now, we won't last five years in the field. (E04)

This anticipation revealed both surprising professional maturity and anxiety regarding perceived gaps in their curriculum, notably the absence of formal preparation for managing the psychological impact of working in crisis contexts.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced view of how future educational and vocational psychologists construct their professional identity in a prolonged security crisis context.

4.1 Construction of a hybrid professional identity

In this sample, participants did not simply apply or reject learned theories but engaged in complex negotiation processes. They appeared to shape a hybrid professional identity at the intersection of humanistic ideals and the pragmatism dictated by urgency. The concept of “reflexive resilience” that emerged from the data offers a context-specific interpretive contribution. It suggests that career adaptability (Savickas, 2005) cannot be fully conceived without a critical dimension that preserves a sense of agency and protects against burnout resulting from passive adaptation.

The anticipation of vicarious trauma as central to their professionalization process highlighted both early maturity and legitimate anxiety regarding training gaps.

4.2 Dialogue with the literature

This study supports the relevance of constructivist guidance approaches (Guichard, 2004) while revealing their limits in contexts where uncertainty represents an existential threat. The use of Self-Determination Theory helped structure the dissonance experienced by students. The findings also echo calls for more contextualized and culturally situated psychologies (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008).

4.3 Implications for training and practice

The implications remain context-specific. Psychology training programs could benefit from structurally integrating preparation for reality shock and psychosocial risk management, including modules on vicarious trauma, reflexive supervision groups, and case studies grounded in local realities. Institutions should also strengthen students' basic psychological needs by creating spaces for exploring professional autonomy, developing competence in authentic contexts, and building a sense of

affiliation with a practitioner community. Longitudinal research would be valuable to follow the evolution of these identity construction and resilience processes over time.

4.4 Study Limitations

By its qualitative nature and specific contextual anchoring, this study has limited transferability. The results are grounded in the particular context of Burkina Faso and Kaya University Center and cannot be generalized without caution. Moreover, the study focused on final-year students, whose perspectives may differ from those of practicing professionals. Finally, the sample size (N=18), while appropriate for a qualitative inquiry, limits the diversity of experiences represented.

5. Conclusion

This study offers a window into the professional identity construction of psychology students in Burkina Faso during a time of crisis. Far from being passive recipients of theory, participants emerged as active agents who negotiated, critiqued, and transformed their knowledge to respond to urgent realities. Their call for more “situated theories” and better preparation for psychosocial risks is not merely academic but a condition for their professional survival and relevance. It is the responsibility of educational and vocational psychology to adapt training and practice models to better prepare future practitioners for the complex social, political, and humanitarian contexts in which they will intervene.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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