



Researchers at risk: vulnerabilities and resilience

Olga Hünler, PhD
Freie Universität Berlin

Scholars at Risk

- Syrian academics in exile are 'often unable to continue their academic work due to legal status, language barriers, psychological trauma, unrecognised qualifications, and other factors' (Parkinson, McDonald and Quinlan, 2020: 185).
- These findings is not limited to Syrian scholars rather applicable to many other scholars in exile.

Common themes

- Different backgrounds
- Different experiences
 - «The process of dehistoricising and homogenising refugee category as universal men, women and children turn them into ‘mute victims’»(Malkki, 1996: 378).
- Trauma, grief and loss (real and symbolic)
 - «In exile, their economic, social and political vulnerability constantly reminds them of their home, fulfilling professional career and stable family life back in Syria, which has been lost to the violent conflict. Many of them refuse to accept ‘any affiliation with refugee status,’ because it strips them from exercising their agency and reminds of ‘being rootless, stateless and rejected’» (Cara, 2019: 78).

Common themes

- Need of support and orientation
 - «A range of research contributions by Syrian academics in exile, epitomises the need for academic support and collaboration rather than mere humanitarian compassion» (Pherali, 2020: 91).
- Everyday racism, discrimination, and microaggressions

Common themes

- Homogenization of refugees

«The state-centric approach to defining political identity deprives non-citizens of their ability to influence policies and regulations that impact on their lives within the host countries. This situation delegates the responsibility of representing refugee voice, with few exceptions, to international agencies, such that 'narration of refugee experiences becomes the prerogative of Western 'experts': refugee lives become a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced'» (Rajaram, 2002: 247).

How to Talk?

- A balanced tone
- Safe spaces
- Not only vulnerability but also resilience
- Solidarity and collegiality instead of pity or charity

Media

- «Both the media representation of refugees and their depiction in the humanitarian literature in the form of visual, textual and digital resources reproduces the Notion of ‘refugeeness’ as speechless physical bodies devoid of individuality and political agency. These representations tend to generate ‘pity’ and serve for fundraising for humanitarian agencies but also reproduce the generalised Western narratives about refugee experiences – as victimhood» (Pherali, 2020: 95).



What to do for yourselves?

- Share your burden
- Ask for help
- Look for supervision
- Be mindful about your limits
- Establish kind but firm boundaries
- Careful with the «secondary trauma»



Thank you so much!

Pherali, T. (2020). 'My life as a second-class human being': Experiences of a refugee academic. *Education and Conflict Review*, (3), 87-97.