Title: *Toward a critical phenomenology of vulnerability: experiences of young refugees building a life in Luxembourg*

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Abstract
The concept of vulnerability has become central in debates and policies around migration and asylum, but its use has been criticised as 'individualising' vulnerability and neglecting the socio-legal structures that promote it. However, shifting the focus on the structural determinants of vulnerability risks ignoring the agentic power and subjective conditions of individuals within a group considered vulnerable. On this backdrop, the current study proposes to focus on the phenomenological level and sets out to provide an exploratory analysis of conditions of experiential vulnerability. The study draws from 15 interviews conducted with a group of young adults who continue to live in temporary reception centres in Luxembourg despite having obtained refugee status. Integrating a conceptual model of vulnerability as embedded, multi-layered, and dynamic with insights from a critical phenomenological approach, the comparative thematic analysis identified three main elements shaping young refugees' experiences of vulnerability: positions, interpretations and (re) actions. The conclusion discusses some limitations of the study and potential implications, focusing on the potential short and long-term impact of experiential vulnerability on migrant individual's well-being and on society as a whole.

Keywords Vulnerability · Critical phenomenology · Refugees · Experience · Agency

Introduction

The notion of vulnerability permeates current public and political debates on migration and international protection (Freedman, 2019; Smith & Waite, 2019; Sözer, 2020; Turner, 2021). Frequently framed as an attribute, rooted in physical traits or situations encountered during migration (ECRE, 2017; Flegar, 2018), vulnerability becomes often reified and normalised into a policy label part of the 'migration apparatus' (Dahinden, 2016) assigned to individuals with specific characteristics (Sözer, 2021).

This 'individualisation' of vulnerability has faced criticism for neglecting the intricate social and political structures producing the conditions encountered by individuals and marginalised groups (Brown, 2017; Kaulino & Matus, 2023). Additionally, Heidbrink (2020) claims that "individualising vulnerability is political", potentially diverting public attention from state actors' responsibility in promoting vulnerability through migration policies. In other words, the focus on individual vulnerability, particularly in a hostile reception system, may strategically

perpetuate existing structures of power, exclusion, and control, directing limited humanitarian resources to refugees fitting the stereotype of a powerless and dependent subject (Grove & Zwi, 2006; Sözer, 2020; Turner, 2021). Consequently, this literature advocates for a paradigm shift in the study of vulnerability in the context of migration from an individual-centric approach to a focus on structural determinants (Heidbrink, 2020).

However, focusing on the structural origins of vulnerability might also inadvertently reinforce the reifying and normalising effect of the vulnerability label assigned to certain groups. Indeed, feminist scholarship challenges the idea that only certain marginalised groups are vulnerable, emphasising that all individuals are potentially vulnerable (Butler, 2016; Cole, 2016; Fineman, 2008). Additionally, while acknowledging how structural systems of inequality disproportionally affect certain groups in society, also within 'vulnerable groups' individuals are unevenly affected by those inequalities (Cole, 2016; Luna, 2009). Finally, a focus on the structural level risks ignoring the agentic power of individuals facing a structural condition of vulnerability, potentially perpetuating stigmatisation and discrimination processes, such as portraying refugees as passive "suffering bodies" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Fassin, 2001; Fontanari, 2017; Huijsmans, 2012).

Hence, echoing broader debates on the role played by structure and agency in migration studies (Bakewell, 2010, de Haas 2021) researchers seem to mainly focus on either individual or structural elements producing conditions of vulnerability. However, vulnerability has also been recognised as a subjective experience, unique for each person (Fineman, 2008; Szkupinski Quiroga et al., 2014). As such, experiences of vulnerability may be based on structural constraints, contingent conditions or individual characteristics but are not automatically determined by them (Gilodi et al., 2022). Indeed, in a previous analysis of the conditions of vulnerabilities encountered by young refugees in Luxembourg, we found that despite facing similar structural challenges, the subjective accounts of their lives and experiences of vulnerability varied considerably (Gilodi et al., 2023).

Thus, the present paper sets out to conduct an exploratory analysis of **experiential vulnerability**, as a condition of vulnerability based on subjective evaluations rather than external attributions, which, we argue, has received limited attention in the literature. Drawing on interviews with young adults (18-30 years old) living in temporary reception centres in Luxembourg, despite having obtained refugee legal status, this study asks how vulnerability, as an experience, takes shape within a group facing shared structural conditions, and how these experiences may affect their present and future in their country of residence.

To answer this research question, we integrate two analytical frameworks: a conceptual model of vulnerability in the context of migration and a critical phenomenological lens. First, we consider experiential vulnerability as one layer of vulnerability operating at the individual level but created by the dynamic interrelation with other conditions of vulnerability, within a specific environment in which the individual is embedded (Gilodi et al., 2022). Second, we conceive experience as grounded in the orientation of an individual in a certain space, which itself is regulated by socio-political systems and structures of power and societal beliefs (Ahmed, 2007; Fanon, 1967; Guenther, 2019). Therefore, a critical phenomenological analysis of young refugees' vulnerability in Luxembourg considers subjective experiences in their dynamic relation with other conditions of vulnerability in that specific context, with its own structures and orientations.

With this study, we hope to contribute to debates about the relative importance of structural constraints and individual agency in determining conditions of vulnerability, showing how the level of experience can act as an intermediary space where the tension between these elements is negotiated and can be better understood. Specifically, by comparing and analysing in depth the accounts of a small group of young refugees, the paper wants to offer an exploratory overview of different elements that in their interaction shape their experiences of vulnerability, leading to new insights about not only the causes but also the potential consequences of conditions of vulnerability.

Experiential vulnerability: individual orientations in an oriented context

Our theoretical understanding of experiences of vulnerability is grounded in a rejection of the negative moral connotation normally attributed to the notion, viewed as a masculinist construction (Anderson, 2003; Fineman, 2008), and in a re-evaluation of vulnerability as a useful analytical category in the context of migration (Gilodi et al., 2022) . It has been theorised that within a multilevel conceptual model, different 'layers' of vulnerability can be identified, being (re)produced at different levels and dynamically interacting with each other (Gilodi et al., 2022). Within this system, experiential vulnerability can be conceived as a condition (or layer) of vulnerability, operating at the individual level, and accounting for the uniqueness of each migrant's personal subjectivity (Gilodi et al., 2022, 2023). Indeed, even when individuals share some characteristics or criteria of vulnerability within a group, vulnerability is still a subjective experience simply because "what we experience is a phenomenal rather than a direct reality" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 196). From a critical phenomenological approach, experience is grounded in the orientation of an individual, or the impression one has of a space by virtue of one's position in that space (Ahmed, 2007). Thus, regarding vulnerability as an experience means acknowledging the unique ways in which individuals subjectively understand the reality around them, depending on the point from which they are looking at it, or in line with an intersectional approach, their intersectional 'location' (Crenshaw, 1991).

However, one's orientation is not only a matter of impressions but of action, as individuals move or orient themselves within the space where they operate (Ahmed, 2007). Subjective experiences of vulnerability cannot be assumed based on fixed criteria that ascribe certain migrants to a 'vulnerable group', as each individual actively adapts, reacts and makes sense of their situation (Gamsakhurdia, 2018, 2019; O'Higgins, 2012). It follows that, to recognise the agentic power of each individual, vulnerability in the context of migration should be conceptualised as **dynamic**, or as the dynamic and continuous negotiation of individuals with the structures of their environment and their subjective interpretations of them (Gilodi et al., 2022). Thus, migrant individuals actively construct their own subjective experiences of vulnerability in dynamic relation with their lived context.

Indeed, the vulnerability faced by migrant groups is also **embedded** in the specific socio-political context and historic time within which they operate (Gilodi et al., 2022). Economic, social and political organisations, historical and cultural patterns, and even geographical and material characteristics create, shape and reproduce idiosyncratic and contingent conditions of vulnerability that can be fully understood only within that (geographical and temporal) space. Similarly, critical phenomenology highlights how subjective experiences should be critically contextualised in the historically inherited structures of power and "hegemonic norms" which

shape them (Guenther, 2021; Gündoğdu, 2022). Applying this approach can thus make us aware that not only individuals but also spaces have an orientation, an orientation toward certain "bodies" that inhabit them more than others (Ahmed, 2007). For example, building on the work of Frantz Fanon (1967), Ahmed argues that "histories of colonialism" have made "a world that is orientated around whiteness" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157) or where "whiteness" has become a "habit". In these spaces, the "white body" is institutionalised as the mould around which institutions are constructed and operate, which strongly affects the experience of "black bodies" inhabiting these spaces (Ahmed, 2007). Thus, considering the orientation of a space means acknowledging that, to a certain extent, legal structures and socio-cultural norms reflect, and may implicitly serve, the people who constructed them. Applying this insight to the context of migration, we may conceive any modern nation-state (including Luxembourg) as oriented toward its own citizens, as reflected by its migration policies, which control migrant' entitlement to rights automatically granted to its citizens, and which, to a certain extent, mark this group as outsiders to that space. Thus, we argue that migrant residents are inevitably affected by the orientation of the country in which they live and that overall experiential vulnerability should be conceived as the product of the dynamic interactions between the orientation of individuals and the orientation of the space in which they are embedded.

Moreover, as vulnerability is a **multi-layered** concept (Gilodi et al., 2022), experiences of vulnerability should be examined in their dynamic interaction with other conditions of vulnerability. Unequal access to resources, embedded in socio-legal and economic systems, can lead to patterns of structural marginalisation, creating conditions of *structural vulnerability* (Casadei, 2018; Quesada et al., 2011). Following decolonial literature, patterns of structural inequality can be viewed as products of colonial legacies, still entrenched in the political systems and 'cultural archives' of European nations, which perpetuate the material, moral and social inferiority of racialised individuals, many of whom have a migration background (Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023; Fanon, 1967; Turunen, 2019). It follows that, in the case of migrant residents, a certain level of structural vulnerability can be conceived as being intrinsic to their legal status, as migration policies, by design, regulate access of foreign citizens to different resources, services and opportunities, which may increase the vulnerability of some migrant residents (Heidbrink, 2020; Lind, 2019; Lind et al., 2023). Migrant residents may also face conditions of *situational vulnerability* when engaging with others or institutions (Gilodi et al., 2022). While encountering these situations is partially a case of "individual serendipity" (Quesada et al., 2011), as their occurrence cannot be predetermined (Gilodi et al., 2023), they tend to mirror structural conditions and unequally impact marginalised groups. Similarly, Ahmed (2000, 2007) argues that based on 'signs of otherness', which are apparent, inherited and embodied, patterns of structural marginalisation promote situations where racialised individuals are singled out as strangers.

Drawing from this reflection, we propose to expand the conceptual model previously elaborated by adding another 'layer' of vulnerability at the individual level: we call conditions of *embodied vulnerability* those linked to characteristics intrinsically connected to one's body and, as such, immediately visible to others, such as phenotype or gender. Undoubtedly, what makes that embodied quality a source of vulnerability is the context in which the person is situated: it is not the colour of one's skin that makes a racialised migrant vulnerable but the structural system of racism permeating, as it has been argued (De Genova, 2018; Erel et al., 2016), migration governance in Europe. Moreover, the embodied vulnerability of a racialised migrant can transcend generations, citizenship and country of birth (Ahmed, 2007; Schinkel, 2018) as well as

other categories used to establish migrants' 'degree of otherness' (e.g. levels of education, position in the labour market, language proficiency, etc.). Thus, migrant residents' embodied vulnerability hinges on their recognition as strangers, which, we argue, is influenced by how closely they resemble or differ from non-migrant residents in that context. It is this recognition that can lead to prejudices and judgments based on (mis)representations attributed to those strangers (Ahmed, 2000; Gündoğdu, 2022) and consequent acts of discrimination and exclusion (Ahmed, 2000).

In conclusion, understanding the experiential vulnerability of young refugees living in reception centres in Luxembourg and its consequences requires conceptualising such experiences as individual orientations, grounded in the interaction with other conditions of vulnerability, within a specific context, with its own structures and orientations.

Context, Participants and Method

The data was collected within the framework of the MIMY project, which investigated the integration processes of young non-EU migrants across 9 European countries, including Luxembourg. Notably, Luxembourg, with its small population (approximately 650,000) boasts the highest proportion of migrant residents (47.4% of the total population) among EU and OECD countries (OECD, 2021). In line with the main historical migration flows to the region, the majority (78.4%) of 'foreign' residents are citizens of other EU countries (Murdock, 2016; STATEC, 2023). Yet, the number of non-EU residents is growing, mainly due to the inflow of Ukrainian citizens (5,238 registered at the end of 2022) and the arrival of asylum seekers (2,269 applications lodged in 2022) from countries such as Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan (EMN Luxembourg, 2023). The attractiveness of Luxembourg as a destination is related to its flourishing tertiary and financial sector (Kolnberger & Koff, 2021; Murdock, 2017), which has made it one of the wealthiest countries in the world (OECD, 2022).

However, migrant residents must face high costs of living and a multilingual landscape with three institutional languages (French, German and Luxembourgish), which partially constraints their opportunities (Kalocsányiová, 2017, Tavares 2020). Additionally, indicators show that especially non-EU nationals experience adverse outcomes compared to locals, including higher unemployment rates, lower net income, increased poverty risk, more household overcrowding, and greater education drop-out rates (Scapolo et al., 2022). Similarly, the saturated national housing market and limited social housing stock negatively affect many inhabitants but especially some groups of migrant residents (Claveres et al., 2020; Lemaire & Oesch, 2022). For example, upon completion of the asylum application process, those applicants who received a positive decision are expected to move out of the reception centres where they were placed upon arrival.[1] However, many refugees[2] are unable to find alternative accommodation on the private

[1] The reception and housing of asylum seekers is under the authority of the National Reception Office (ONA), but in most cases the facilities are managed by two national NGOs (Caritas and Red Cross) (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, 2023).

[2] Please note that, being aware of the complexities of labelling an individual as 'a refugee' (Zetter, 1991), the term 'refugee' is used to indicate a legal status and its consequences in terms of duties and rights of the individual who holds it. Legally, it would be more correct to speak of 'beneficiaries of International Protection' (BIP) since, depending on the legal evaluation of the case, some applicants are granted subsidiary protection rather than refugee status. However, considering this language to be problematic as well, and since no distinction is made between these

market and are thus exceptionally 'allowed' to stay temporarily in these facilities, paying rent mostly redrawn from their social benefits (Lemaire & Oesch, 2022; Vianelli et al., 2019). In contrast with 'emergency' narratives, refugees consistently make up almost half of the residents in the reception centres (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, 2023), promoting issues of overcrowding and worsening living conditions.

This study is based on semi-structured interviews with 15 young people (18-30) who found themselves in this ambivalent position: holding a refugee status and residence permit but still living in 'temporary' reception facilities. At the time of the interviews (October 2021-March 2022), two participants had lived in this type of facilities for over six years, while the shortest length of stay in the group was seven months. The great majority were male (N=12) and were under 25 years of age (N=11). More than half of the participants (N=9) arrived in Luxembourg as minors, four of whom arriving directly to the country with their mothers and siblings through family reunification procedures initiated by their fathers. At the time of the interview only five young people were living in Luxembourg without any family members. A third of the participants were born in Afghanistan, while four were born in Eritrea, and the rest came from Syria, Iraq and Iran. In terms of education, most of the young people interviewed did complete their secondary education in their country of origin (or in a country of transit), three interrupted their secondary education to make the journey to Europe, and two reported not having any previous educational experience. Regardless, the great majority of the participants were directed to enrol in some type of educational training after their arrival in Luxembourg and, at the time of the interview, eleven were young people enrolled in an educational programme.[3]

The interviews were mostly conducted in English or French, depending on the interviewee's preference, while two were conducted in their native language with the help of interpreters.[4] A broad spectrum of topics, covering professional and educational experiences as well as social and familial relationships, were discussed in relation to their lives before and after arriving in Luxembourg and to their plans and hopes for the future.[5] The interview guide, the words chosen, and the pace and tone of the interview were all carefully negotiated by the researchers in each encounter to create a safe space and avoid ethical risks such as re-traumatisation and stigmatisation.

The interviews were transcribed and thematically coded in MAXQDA 2022. The exploratory analysis of experiential vulnerability followed three consecutive steps. First, emerging inductive coding was used to identify experiences of vulnerability as reported by the participants. These individual experiences were then comparatively analysed to understand which elements may be

two statuses in terms of rights and benefits in Luxembourg, the word refugee is used here to refer to people who have gained the status of 'BIP'.

[3] Two participants attended public high schools, three were carrying out vocational training and seven participants were enrolled in the so-called *reception classes for young adults* (CLIJA+), which are classes offered to young people between 18 and 24 years old, newly arrived in the country, with no previous knowledge of French or German (the two main languages of instruction in the national educational system).

[4] One interview was conducted in Arabic and one in Farsi with the help of non-professional interpreters with a refugee background.

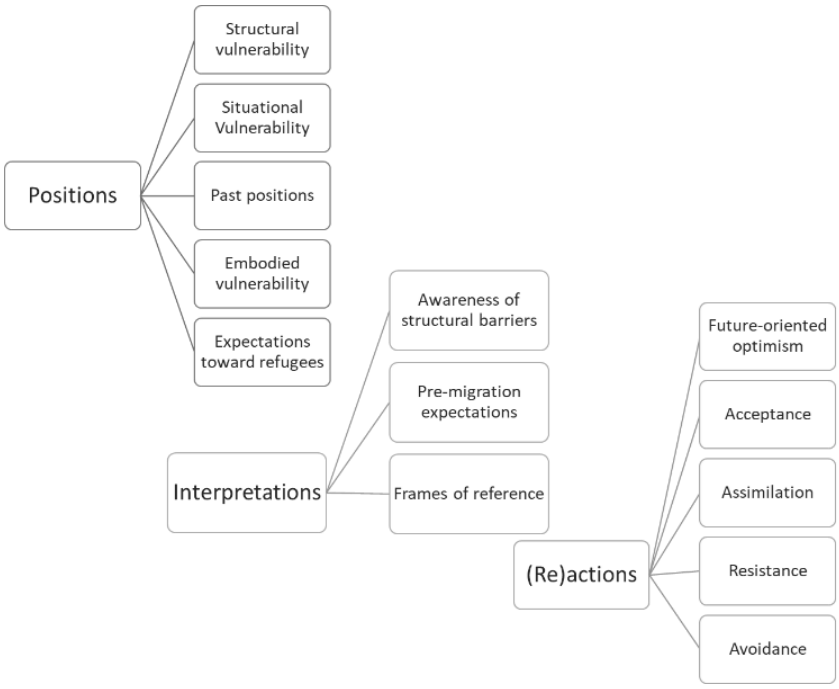
[5] The interview guide was developed by researchers at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) of Milan, as part of the [project name] project to ensure comparability of the findings from each case study and was then applied to the context of research of Luxembourg.

involved in their differential occurrence. The emerged patterns were then interpreted applying the critical phenomenological framework for conditions of vulnerability described above.

Components of experiential vulnerability: positions, interpretations and (re)actions

From our analysis of the stories and accounts of young refugees in Luxembourg, three main components emerged as shaping their orientations and subjective experiences of vulnerability: *positions, interpretations, (re)actions*[6]. The figure below (*Figure 1*) summarises these elements and the factors that construct them, as they will be presented below.

Fig. 1 *Components of experiential vulnerability*



Positions

Despite the homogenising force of the refugee label (Clark, 2007) and some characteristics shared by all participants by study design (i.e. refugee status, housing in reception centres, age), the analysis suggests that the young refugees interviewed occupied different positions in Luxembourg, which impacted the occurrence of experiential vulnerability. Following our theoretical framework, we broadly understand positions as the "points of departure" of our participants' orientations: social, professional, educational, economic, etc. Accordingly, the following section will present several components emerged from our analysis as contributing to construct these diverse positions, providing examples.

One of the main components shaping the positions of our participants relates to conditions of structural vulnerability faced in the country. In line with previous studies (Tavares 2020), a

[6] The plural is used to indicate that each participant could simultaneously occupy multiple positions, have different interpretations and enact different (re)actions.

prominent example reported by interviewees concerns the limited educational opportunities offered by the complex and multilingual Luxembourgish educational system. Indeed, the plurality of educational pathways, services and institutions, combined with different multilingual requirements, seems to increase the complexity of an educational system that is already foreign to newly arrived migrants. At times, this can create feelings of frustration, as the story of Habib[7] shows:

"CASNA [School reception unit for newcomer pupils of the Ministry of Education] never told me anything; every time I went to CASNA they were like 'okay , you can't go to the university because you don't know French; you can't go to school because you have a high school degree and you just have to go to the French course for as many years as it takes until you get to a B2 level, then you can go to the university'. Then I just stopped going there…".

Moreover, our analysis suggests that the position of each of our participants in Luxembourg is affected by the conditions of situational vulnerability that emerge for some individuals within a certain shared structure. For example, living in reception centres seems to contribute to the social isolation of all its residents, with most of them reportedly having few opportunities for interactions with local residents outside the centres. However, while some of our interview partners could rely on the support of family members also residing in Luxembourg, those alone in the country encountered more pervasive conditions of social isolation. When asked who he turned to in moments of difficulty, Soban, who lives in Luxembourg alone, replied:

> *"I have friends I've met here, but they're not real friends, they're people I met on the way in or on the way out. […] There's no one for that. […] No one I can tell that I have a problem, that I'm sad. When I'm sad I call my family or my wife [back home] to talk".*

Furthermore, our analysis highlighted the importance of 'past positions', by which we mean the experiences and status prior to arrival in the country of residence. For example, among our interviewees, Ali stood out, given his position as a wealthy and highly educated man from a prominent family. Like all other participants, at the time of the interview, Ali was living in a reception centre, arguably a condition of structural vulnerability. Yet, he assuredly described living in the centre as a temporary phase while he waited for his wife to join him in Luxembourg:

> *"So when she's here, I have to buy a house. It's not something that the government should help me, I can do it, but the thing is here that you have to have a job. Then you have to buy accommodation, rent accommodation. It's quite difficult. It's complicated. But I know there are like lots of solutions. When you have a problem, you have lots of solutions*".

As the quote shows, despite acknowledging some challenges imposed by structural and contextual conditions, Ali expressed confidence throughout the interview in his ability to 'find solutions' relying on his educational qualifications and economic resources, which, he explicitly argued, put him in a different position than other migrants living in the same centre. This re-affirms the importance of adopting an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991) and considering the interactions between different conditions of vulnerability over time. Despite common living conditions, Ali's past positions (i.e. wealthy and highly educated) makes his current position in Luxembourg quite different from other residents in the centre, affecting how he orients himself

[7] Please note that all the names used to refer to participants in the study are culturally sensitive pseudonyms.

in this new space. Indeed, as Ahmed (2007, p. 160) suggests, orientation "is also a matter of what is behind, as a form of inheritance, which affects how bodies arrive in spaces and worlds."

The position of young refugees in Luxembourg was also affected by their embodied vulnerability. Several participants explained how, in their interactions with institutions or other residents of the country, they felt singled out and treated as strangers. As argued above, their visibility can contribute to their vulnerability as it re-affirms their status as 'different' or 'other' from the 'prototypical resident', which can then lead to acts of discrimination and prejudice when stereotypes accompany the identification. Aref reportedly experienced this type of vulnerability often:

> *"I have like many of these experiences […] I went to a restaurant and they didn't let me in, because they said: 'this is not suitable for you.'"*

Following this quote, the 'otherness' attributed to certain refugees because of their looks defines their position and area of action in Luxembourg, producing expectations about what these young people can and should do in those spaces.

Consequently, we find that the expectations of the space toward refugees can be seen as the final element shaping their position within the country. For example, several participants reported that educators and other professional figures directed them toward vocational training as more easily accessible. What could be seen as a good faith effort to direct young refugees toward 'obtainable' goals, can also be viewed as grounded in prejudicial and discriminatory expectations about the position that residents with a refugee background can and should occupy in the country. The testimony of Farah is emblematic of these hidden assumptions:

> *"For example, here everybody knows of the thing that we are refugees, we are… less IQ, you know? [laughs] And I don't know why, but they think like this. For example, when I say I would like to become a pilot and they think: 'wow, pilot is so difficult. It's so expensive to you and [how could you think about that?!]'".*

Interpretations

The analysis revealed that the positions occupied in the space could not account alone for individual orientations and experiences of vulnerability, as different participants subjectively interpreted similar positions in different ways. Thus, in this section, we consider young refugees' *interpretations* of their position in the country as relevant for the Self in positive, neutral or negative terms. Based on our participants' accounts, we find that these interpretations are influenced by three main factors: awareness of structural vulnerability, pre-migration expectations and frames of reference.

While, as illustrated in the section above, the opportunities of young refugees in Luxembourg may be constrained by several 'objective' structural issues, our data reveals that the level of awareness of structural barriers varied considerably across our participants. This, in turn, affected the extent to which they interpreted their position in the country as limited or bounded. Indeed, when discussing their life in Luxembourg, several participants expressed contentment, characterising current obstacles as transient and ordinary challenges without enduring impacts on their lives. For example, limited language skills were highlighted as the main obstacle to be overcome to access the opportunities the country has to offer.

In line with previous research (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al., 2021), the (un)fulfilment of pre-migration expectations, linked to the choice of Luxembourg as their final destination, was also found to influence the participants' interpretation of (and satisfaction with) their present and future lives in Luxembourg. Most of our interviewees chose Luxembourg as their new country of residence when already on the road to or through Europe, based on information circulating among other migrants and refugees. However, the facts that motivated their choices were not always accurate, which, in some instances, led to unpleasant surprises upon arrival. This was the case for Aref, who explained:

> *"[…] one of the reasons that we came to Luxembourg was they told us, compared to other countries, […] this country is giving you the status easily."*

Instead, for almost two years, Aref and his mother waited to know whether they would be granted asylum and could thus build a life in Luxembourg. This fostered feelings of rejection from a country that, in their view, placed their dreams and ambitions on hold during the asylum application process:

> *"So the paperwork here is… I don't know why, but for us it took a long time. […] This is real life. Because we came with a lot of wishes and promises. [...] they always tell us that: 'okay, your stomach is full. So what else, what do you ask?'. I said: 'no, this is not about stomach. This is nothing about food. We want to be active. We want to... we have so many dreams about what we can do!'*"

Interestingly, having relied on inaccurate information to choose their destination did not always lead to unfulfilled expectations. For example, Hakim was told that Luxembourg would not "deport back" asylum seekers whose application was rejected:

> *"Because some of the countries they have the case […] to deport back to their own country. Fortunately, Luxembourg didn't have it. […] That's why I decided to come in Luxembourg".*

In reality, deportation following a rejected asylum application happens regularly in Luxembourg (EMN Luxembourg, 2023) but, since his asylum application was approved, Hakim's expectation was not betrayed. Consequently, despite describing several challenges he is facing, Hakim reports viewing positively his position in the country:

> *"The expectations I had… some of them, they are right. […] And then, the most important was the resident permit and I got it. So it's good in Luxembourg…*"

The third factor identified as shaping young refugees' interpretations of their position in Luxembourg is the main frame of reference used to make such evaluation. Supporting findings from previous studies (Faist & Bilecen, 2015), when describing their lives in Luxembourg and the challenges or opportunities they faced, participants often used transnational or national 'spaces of comparison'. In line with social comparison theories (Sienkiewicz et al., 2016), depending on the frame of reference used, the comparison may promote a positive or negative perception of one's position in Luxembourg. Thus, by comparing their current circumstances to the one in their country of origin or transit ('transnational comparison'), several participants reported being quite satisfied. For example, Kidane compared his current situation to the dangers he had encountered on his journey through Libya:

> *"In Libya, [I was] too sick. [...] always stressed, there was no strength, I was always sleeping. [...] I was always hungry, [...] When I came here, I was not stressed, I was happy.*"

As another example, for Farah, who at 15 escaped a marriage with a much older man arranged by her father, the main point of transnational comparison related to women's rights:

> *"… now I'm free. He can't do [anything]. And always my mother [says] 'OK, we have problems. We are refugees, we have problems, but it's so better than [name country of origin].' The good point is, it's just about rights of women, you know? We have the right to speak, we have the right to do what we want. That's important*."

Thus, taking an intersectional approach can not only highlight the positions refugees occupy in the country of residence but also their interpretations of them within a transnational space of comparison.

On the contrary, when comparing themselves to their Luxembourgish peers (national comparison), the participants' interpretation of their position in Luxembourg was described in negative terms, as limited or deprived. For example, Aref, one of the few participants enrolled in a regular high school class with local residents, described several situations in which feelings of deprivation emerged from the comparison with his classmates and friends, especially in relation to their different financial situations. He used these words to describe his vulnerability:

> *"Maybe my place, my place in the country as like a level. Sometimes I feel like I'm below the normal level. […] My friends after school, they are used to go to […] they pay like €20 for a meal. I cannot afford that. And I hate to say to... I always come up with excuses to ditch them, like: 'I have to go, my mother's calling' and stuff like that. So I did it like a hundred times and they stopped, stopped asking me to go [with them]*".

Following Festinger's theory, a person tends to choose a 'target of comparison' similar to them (Festinger, 1954). However, considering why our participants used different frames of reference to describe their position in Luxembourg, we argue that social contact may be an important factor in determining the space of comparison used. On the one hand, as in the case of Aref, regular contact with local peers may promote 'national comparisons', leading to feelings of deprivation and frustration about their 'relative' vulnerable position in Luxembourg. On the other hand, for the majority of our participants, who reportedly have had almost no opportunity to interact with other local residents, transnational spaces may constitute a more meaningful frame of reference, resulting in positive interpretations. This would suggest that young refugees' profound isolation from the rest of society may paradoxically function as a sort of protective mechanism, shielding them from the comparison with local residents and the awareness of structural barriers. Significantly, as we will explore in the next section, different interpretations seem to lead to different (re)actions, which, in the long run, may have an impact on the future position they will hold in the country.

(Re)actions

How individuals (re)act to their position in the country, based on their interpretation of it, is the third element emerging from our analysis as contributing to the construction of our participants' experiential vulnerability. (Re)action is deliberately spelled to convey the tension between

individual agentic power and structural constraints, as well as the cognitive and behavioural dimensions at play in experiences of vulnerability. We use the word *action* to point to the behavioural component of the experiential life and the agency that each individual migrant shows, no matter the circumstances, in facing challenges and constraints, thus rejecting potentially patronising and stigmatising narratives of refugees as passive victims. In phenomenological terms, this means capturing the performance of orientations within embodied realities, which is in itself "an orientation towards the future, insofar as the action is also the expression of a wish or intention" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 153). We add the prefix *re-* to acknowledge how those actions are intrinsically bounded by structural constraints as individuals cognitively position themselves vis-à-vis their environment and how these may not always be carefully designed strategies but rather unconscious responses, bringing different outcomes in the short and long term. Thus, to look at the reactions of young refugees in Luxembourg as a component of their orientation may also contribute to our understanding of the consequences they may carry for their future in the new country of residence.

Different patterns of reactions to their perceived position in Luxembourg have been identified across our participants, as they were articulated in their aspirations, desires and future perspectives about their lives in the country. For those participants who showed limited awareness of structural constraints and positively interpreted their position in the country, a common reaction consisted of what we call a future-oriented optimism. As the challenges faced (such as language proficiency) and relative experiences of vulnerability are considered temporary, their energies and outlooks are focused on the future, which they regard in positive terms. For example, Soban described his future in Luxembourg in these terms:

> *"When I learn the Luxembourgish language, when I take the nationality, when my wife comes here [then I will be] really happy. And life will be great for me.*"

Other participants demonstrated a higher awareness of the structural challenges confronting them but seemed to accept their position in Luxembourg and their (limited) opportunities or space of action within this context. Tarik's account of his wishes for his future is quite illustrative of this reaction of acceptance:

> *"I want to be a nurse […] I mean, if it's possible, maybe a doctor even. I don't know if it's possible or not […] I mean I am a refugee so... I don't know, maybe it could be hard. I don't know the system here, for refugees, I don't know . . ."*

Tarik expresses uncertainty about his plans for the future, not unlike many other young adults. Yet, as he explains the source of his doubts, his words point to an awareness of his 'vulnerable position' as a refugee and the limits this imposes on his future. Such reaction can be read as an internalisation of the patterns of structural marginalisation, by virtue of which migrant residents reshape choices, desires, actions, and even self-conceptions based on "what is possible for them" within that space (O'Reilly, 2023, p. 9). Interestingly, while accepting one's limited prospect in a new country of residence may be conceived as an adaptive and even effective strategy in the short term, it may consolidate one's subordinate position in the social hierarchy (e.g. through lower wages, more precarious positions, challenging living conditions, etc.), strongly affecting the future trajectories in the country of residence (Szkupinski Quiroga et al., 2014). Additionally, on a larger scale, following Quesada and colleagues (2011), such reactions can be seen as further

promoting "'symbolic violence' whereby the everyday violence of imposed scarcity and insecurity is understood as natural and deserved" (p. 2).

We named assimilation[8] another common pattern of reactions identified, whereby learning and adopting customs, behaviours, languages, etc. of the local population was described as the best (and sometimes only) way to overcome structural challenges. These accounts revealed again a profound internalisation of the opportunity structures and discourses around the position of migrants in society, which we can understand as an attempt to reduce one's *embodied vulnerability* (to not stand out) by acting, as much as possible, as any other resident. Indeed, Aref reportedly started to imitate his younger classmates in his regular Luxembourgish school to blend in and avoid being stigmatised as different:

> *"I was feeling like a wild animal with his teeth getting loose because he is getting old... So I felt really bad the first year. But after the first year I said [to my self]: 'never mind, I am just gonna be like them*'".

Thus, upon perceiving his position in the school space as 'other' ('a wild animal'), Aref reacted by conforming to the behaviour and attitudes of his fellow classmates, which he later regards as a performance, or in his words as 'pretending'. When asked whether things changed after years in the school, he replies with these words:

> *"I got better in pretending. Because deeply, I'm still like worried about the stuff that I don't have, for example the life, the future, how I have to feed my family and stuff like that*".

At times, assimilation (re)actions consisted in defying and disproving negative stereotypes toward refugees, which they intuitively understood as affecting their position in the country. This was the case of Hakim, who explained wanting to separate himself from the stereotype of the 'lazy refugee':

> *"…that's what they're thinking, that's what they expect from us. So you have to work for yourself, you have to manage your own life, that to be independent, also to not be under support of Caritas or another association. […] since they gave me the [residence] permit I'm trying […] to prove it and show a different face, a different view [of] me [from the one of others]".*

By showing a "different face", not the face of a refugee, Hakim hopes to gain access to more opportunities that, unlike local residents, he cannot yet reach.

When one's position in society was perceived as deprived or unequal, giving life to feelings of dissatisfaction about future prospects in the country, some participants challenged their positions and opportunities in different areas: we named this the resistance (re)action. As an example, Farah, who reported being ridiculed for her somewhat ambitious job aspirations by a social worker, replied with these words:

> *"I said OK, I want what I want! I want to do it. I don't know why they think they are more than us!*"

[8] We acknowledge that this term has a long history and specific definitions spanning different academic fields: for example, as an acculturation strategy (see Berry, 2005) or as a policy framework for the governance of migration-related diversity (see Rodríguez-García, 2010). However, the term here is used to describe a theme, emerging from the data as denoting a pattern of (re)actions, and does not refer to specific definitions employed in previous research.

Thus, perceiving the educational opportunities offered to her as in conflict with her personal ambitions and based on unfair prejudice and stereotypes, Farah's reaction was to resist the push toward different paths (for example, a vocational educational trajectory) and defy the barriers she faced.

This reflection well connects to the final pattern of (re)actions that emerged from the data, which we named avoidance. After being confronted with their perceived disadvantaged positions in different settings and encounters with institutions or local residents, some of the study's participants reported avoiding certain situations, practices and spaces. As an example, after starting a first educational training in Luxembourg, Tarik reported dropping out of school for two years:

> *"Because I was new at the time, I didn't know anything. No language, only English. I didn't know the rules how to... how to be in school in general really. […] Like at the time I did not, I did not have any idea what I was doing, in school when I was there... […] Because when I came here, I had like [my] vision but then I got put in reality and it was just a shock for me…*".

Indeed, as Ahmed (2007) points out, to "know where to find things" is more pivotal than individual inclinations or capacities in enabling a person to act. However, the orientation of a space makes that space familiar to and ready to accommodate certain inhabitants more than others. Thus, when 'put' in this 'reality', which is unfamiliar to him by its very orientation, Tarik felt overwhelmed. In front of this incredibly challenging position, he reacted by avoiding the unfamiliar and inhospitable school environment, which meant, in contrast with his original plans and expectations, interrupting (temporarily) his educational trajectory.

At times, avoidant reactions were enacted to pre-emptively avoid feelings of stigmatisation. For example, after recounting instances in which he was ridiculed for speaking French poorly or more explicitly harassed, Aref explained:

> *"I was sometimes afraid that maybe the next person is going to treat me like that. So I was avoiding to talk and stuff like that*."

Aref's experience is in line with findings from Szkupinski Quiroga and colleagues (2014) in Arizona, where, since a change in immigration legislation incentivised the 'stopping' by the police of the 'Latino' residents, the members of this community, feeling as targets of micro and macroaggressions, increased their social isolation, regardless of individual legal status and the different potential outcomes of the 'stopping' encounter.

Finally, reactions of avoidance can also lead to searching for better positions elsewhere and, thus, further mobility plans. Two participants described these as their long-term strategy and, ironically, as contingent on becoming Luxembourgish, which will give them freedom of movement and residence within the EU. Regardless of whether these plans will come to fruition, it is interesting to note that the choice to move was reportedly based on their limited positions in Luxembourg. Referring again to his betrayed expectations about life in Luxembourg, Aref explains with these words:

> *"[…] because our hopes when we came here was to stay here for a long time […] But when we came here, we got disappointed and again, 20% of my brain went to that way, to stress about the future because, I told you, it's the DNA that we have to move. I thought that I'm going to overcome this DNA, but no I'm still feeling something."*

Thus, Aref described his migration plans as an instinctual and inherited reaction to feelings of dissatisfaction and deprivation, which he experienced again when expectations about his position in Luxembourg were unmet.

Implications, Limitations and Conclusions

This paper set out to provide an exploratory analysis of the subjective experiences of vulnerability of a group of migrants living in the same precarious condition, as holders of refugee status still residing in temporary reception centres in Luxembourg. Integrating a conceptual framework of vulnerability as embedded, multi-layered and dynamic with a critical phenomenological approach, this study proposed to contribute to previous literature by going beyond categorical dichotomies between structural and individual dimensions of vulnerability and offering new insights into their dynamic interplay on the phenomenological level. The analysis revealed three core elements shaping our participants' experiential vulnerability as well as a series of factors that constructed them among our participants, which we have mapped out and discussed. In the following section we consider some possible implications of these findings and limitations of the present study, to be addressed in future research.

First, our analysis showed that experiences of vulnerability are complex and potentially contradictory. In line with an exploratory design, the data gathered in the interview was covered different aspects of the participants lives, which allowed us to identify different positions, interpretations and (re)actions within each individual account, depending on the life dimensions considered. For example, as a student, a person may be greatly dissatisfied by the perceived limited educational opportunity offered to young refugees in Luxembourg (Gilodi et al., 2023), which may provoke feelings of resentment and (re)actions of resistance. Yet, that same person, as a woman who fled an arranged marriage, may also feel safe and happy in her new country of residence because it is perceived to offer more freedom to women than her country of birth. In other terms, depending on the social identity salient in a certain context, different frames of reference may be activated, leading to different interpretations and reactions (Verkuyten, 2005). Thus, this study has shown that it is crucial to remain aware of how different conditions of vulnerability interact and that policies and interventions should not ignore intersecting needs and challenges across domains. Building on these insights, future studies could further explore how individuals perceive and negotiate their own differential, and possibly contradictory, patterns of experiential vulnerability and how these may be shaped at the interpersonal level. Indeed, while the present study focused solely on the subjective level, a next important step would be to explore how conditions of vulnerability are understood, described, and negotiated across different interpersonal interactions and relationships (e.g. with family, co-national networks, civil society organizations, other local residents, etc,).

Second, while discussions often centre on the causes of vulnerability (Sözer, 2021), our findings suggests that examining the consequences of vulnerability over time is crucial. Although longitudinal data would be needed to map out how patterns of experiential vulnerability may evolve over time, our analysis hints at the short- and long-term potential impact initial experiences may have on our participants' futures in Luxembourg. For example, a young person arriving in Luxembourg, after experiencing great violence, with limited previous education and resources, may happily accept enrolling in vocational training and securing a manual low-paid

job. Indeed, these choices may be described as an adaptive strategy or as a 'successful' integration trajectory. Yet, over time, that same individual may experience vulnerability, for example, realising that professional ambitions, put aside at first, may never come to fruition. As another example, individuals from privileged backgrounds may enact assimilationist (re)actions, using their resources to become increasingly similar to the local population. However, if we follow Schinkel (2018, p. 7): there is no "assimilation perfect enough […] that qualifies them or their 'group' as unproblematically part of 'society'". In other words, the embodied vulnerability of migrant residents (e.g. of a darker skin colour or an Arabic last name) may still be used to mark them as strangers, which can create profound feelings of resentment or helplessness. Thus, we urge future studies to adopt a broader temporal outlook and longitudinal data to fully grasp the consequences of experiential vulnerability. Doing so may also offer a new lens through which to examine and understand the conscious and unconscious strategies adopted by new migrant residents, potentially informing integration scholarship and policies.

Beyond individual implications, patterns of experiential vulnerability among refugees and migrant residents may significantly impact Luxembourg's societal dynamics. Indeed, all the participants planned to acquire Luxembourgish citizenship, becoming full members (at least in legal terms) of the country's society. Thus, for example, reactions of acceptance may further enhance the ethnic stratification of the Luxembourgish labour market (Manço et al., 2014) and growing dissatisfaction or frustration among migrant residents may lead to higher social segregation, lower levels of social cohesion and in extreme cases even radicalisation. These possibilities raise questions on the inclusiveness of current migration policies and the differential patterns of opportunities and vulnerability of 'foreign residents' in Luxembourg, comprising almost half of its population. We may ask: is it possible that the implicit orientation of the country favours migrants aligning more closely with the 'imagined' Luxembourgish citizen? Relying on individual-level data collected among a specific group of participants at a specific time, limited the extent to which we could explore the macro-level policies and meso-level social actors constructing the context in which individual migrants are embedded. However, by relying on multiple data sources (e.g. historical-archive data) and including multiple groups of migrant residents in Luxembourg, future studies could explore how the socio-legal, historical and cultural development of Luxembourg as a country of residence of migrant communities is related to global structures of marginalisation and inequality and how these shaped its 'orientation' and migration policies (Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023), impacting different migrant groups in different ways. This type of analysis may further contribute to disrupting paternalistic neoliberal discourses individualising vulnerability (Savaş et al., 2023) and provide further insights into the role played by structures of power and national narratives in affecting the life trajectories of different migrant groups residing in the country.

To conclude, although our findings are based on qualitative data gathered among a specific group, and thus not generalizable, we hope future studies may further explore (and perhaps validate) the constructive elements of experiential vulnerability identified in this study across varied groups, in different contexts, and among wider samples. Consequently, the current paper can be conceived as a first step toward a critical phenomenology of vulnerability, a new and potentially fruitful line of research able to acknowledge the effect of broad systems of exclusion in shaping subjective trajectories as well as the primacy of experiences of marginalised migrants as potential promotors of change, empathy and connectedness (Zoli et al., 2023).

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Ethics Approval

The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Review Panel of the University of Luxembourg (ERP 19–055 MIMY, 6 March 2020).

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.