Exploring the Impact of War on International Community College Students from Ukraine: A Case Study from Toronto

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Abstract

Since the full-scale war in Ukraine began in February 2022, many Ukrainians have migrated abroad. Canada, with its tradition of welcoming refugees and other displaced persons and its large Ukrainian community, has accepted thousands of Ukrainian migrants. After arriving in Canada, some decided to enroll in community colleges to improve their labor-market skills and to facilitate their transition to life in Canada. This empirical study draws on the psychological resilience theory and the social support theory to examine the challenges these students face, the coping mechanisms they use, and the support they receive from their colleges and Canadian society. The findings reveal that the participants experience stress, anxiety, helplessness, and isolation, owing to concerns about family members in Ukraine and difficulty adapting to a foreign environment. Financial worries also loom large because of their families' loss of property and income, as well as their limited job opportunities in Canada.

Keywords: community colleges, international students, mental stress, war in Ukraine

Анотація

З початку повномасштабної війни в Україні в лютому 2022 року багато українців емігрували за кордон. Канада, зі своєю традицією приймати біженців та інших переміщених осіб, а також з великою українською громадою, прийняла тисячі українських мігрантів. Після прибуття до Канади деякі з них вступили до муніципальних коледжів, щоб покращити свої навички на ринку праці та полегшити процес адаптації до життя в Канаді. З метою вивчення проблем, з якими стикаються студенти, психологічних механізмів, які вони використовують для подолання цих проблем, підтримки, яку вони отримують від коледжів і канадського суспільства було проведено емпіричне дослідження, яке спирається на теорію психологічної стійкості та теорію соціальної підтримки. Результати свідчать, що учасники дослідження переживають стрес, тривогу, безпорадність та самотність через занепокоєння щодо родичів, які перебувають в Україні, та через труднощі з адаптацією до чужого середовища. Фінансові проблеми також набирають великих масштабів через втрату їхніми родинами майна та матеріального забезпечення, а також через обмежені можливості працевлаштування в Канаді.

Introduction

Brief Review of Ukrainian Migration to Canada

      Canada has a rich history of embracing immigrants, refugees, and other displaced people from Ukraine. This brief review examines this history from a perspective relevant to the main theme of the study: the experiences of Ukrainians who fled war in their country. The first wave of Ukrainians arrived in Canada in 1891, with an estimated 170,000 immigrants landing between 1891 and 1914. These individuals were primarily poor peasants in search of improved livelihoods (Swyripa, 2022). After the First World War, when Ukraine was incorporated into the Soviet Union, a large number of Ukrainian refugees arrived in Canada (Gerus & Rea, 1985). Another wave of migration occurred after the Second World War, with 34,000 Ukrainians arriving in Canada by 1954 (Swyripa, 2022), primarily as refugees fleeing persecution by the Soviet authorities.

      After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many former Soviet citizens were able to travel freely for the first time, and another 112,000 Ukraine immigrants came to Canada by 2016 (Hou & Yan, 2020). In 2014, the Russian Federation annexed the Ukrainian Autonomous Republic of Crimea, and occupied parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in Eastern Ukraine. These events caused the displacement of many Ukrainians, with some seeking to emigrate to Canada. Previous research indicates that some young Ukrainians pursued a Canadian college education to that end (Legusov, 2021). From 2015 to 2022, Canada accepted 23,570 Ukrainians as permanent residents (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022).

      More recently, Canada has provided sanctuary to thousands of Ukrainians escaping the war with the Russian Federation. Under the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) program, 1,189,320 Ukrainians applied to come to Canada, of whom 961,975 were accepted, and 286,752 arrived between March 17, 2022, and March 23, 2024 (Government of Canada, 2024a). This cohort constitutes largest number of Ukrainian migrants moving to Canada in such a short period. In this study, Ukrainian nationals who came to Canada under the CUAET program are referred to as migrants rather than refugees or immigrants. Even though most of them escaped war and experienced extreme hardship, they did not seek asylum and, therefore, cannot be considered refugees. It is likely that many of them will eventually obtain Canadian permanent residency and citizenship, but initially they were invited to Canada for three years, after which they are expected to return to Ukraine. Thus, the term "migrant" is best suited to describe them at this point.

      In recognition of the challenges these Ukrainian migrants face, the Canadian government has introduced several opportunities to help them rebuild their lives in a secure and peaceful environment (Government of Canada, 2024a). Under the CUAET program, they are allowed to work and study in Canada. Some recently arrived Ukrainians have enrolled in community colleges to gain practical, marketable skills so that they can forge new lives in their adopted country. As Stevenson and Baker (2018) point out, higher education can enable refugees to gain knowledge and skills that will improve their employability, thereby easing their integration into the host country by enriching their social capital. That being said, many of them endured the trauma of war in their homeland, with all its concomitant effects on their mental and physical well-being. The impact of such experiences on their ability to adapt to and thrive in Canada's college system, job market, and society is a topic that has yet to be fully investigated.

Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology as a Vehicle for Integrating International Students into the Labor Market and Society

      Ontario's colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs) differ from American two-year junior colleges, which primarily prepare students for university. Instead, Ontario's CAATs are independent establishments that prioritize technical and vocational education and preparation of graduates for the workforce. They offer a wide variety of programs, but all feature programs in business, applied arts, health services, and information technology (Jones & Skolnick, 2009). Even though CAATs were created in the late 1960s to address localized labor market demands and to contribute to the social and economic development of local communities (Jones, 1996), their societal role has broadened substantially since then.

      Today, in addition to their original mission, they provide training to individuals who for various reasons have lost their employment, through the Better Jobs Ontario (formerly Second Career) program (Centennial College, 2024). They administer bridging programs for internationally trained professionals in order to "launch skilled newcomers into positions

that capitalize on their previous skills and experience in the shortest time possible" (Seneca Polytechnic, 2024a, para 1). CAATs provide English-as-a-second-language courses to newcomers and other non-native speakers of English. Many Ontario colleges have agreements with universities to enable their students to begin working toward a university degree during their studies and to earn both a college diploma and a university degree (University of Toronto, 2024). A notable aspect of a CAAT education is emphasis on practical work experience. Each CAAT has a specialized unit responsible for creating and overseeing work-integrated learning (WIL) programs for students, which are especially beneficial to international students, giving them an opportunity to develop vital professional contacts in the workplace of their host country.

Statistics Canada (2010, para 2) defines international students as "non-Canadian students who do not have 'permanent resident' status and have had to obtain the authorization of the Canadian government to enter Canada with the intention of pursuing an education." Recognizing that international students face particular challenges in adjusting to a new country in general and the labor market in particular, CAATs provide them with guidance and assistance tailored to their needs. Such services include language support, career counseling, immigration advisement, and cultural-integration initiatives. Furthermore, the colleges help international students and graduates connect with employers (Seneca Polytechnic, 2024b), community organizations, and settlement agencies (George Brown College, 2024). After completing a college certificate, diploma, or degree program, international graduates are eligible to apply for a postgraduation work permit (PGWP) (Government of Canada, 2024b), which may vary in length from eight months to three years. Thus, international graduates have an opportunity to acquire valuable work experience that can lead to permanent residency and eventually citizenship.

This research aims to analyze the experiences of Ukrainian international community college students affected by the ongoing war in their country as they try to integrate into the college community and the Canadian labor market. The study seeks to address the following research questions:
1. Do the study participants experience psychological challenges resulting from the war in their home country and how do they cope with such challenges?
2. What support do they receive from their college and other sources, and how do they perceive and assess such support?

Literature Review

Despite the rich and growing literature on refugees and their children who pursue secondary education in host countries after experiencing trauma in their home countries (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023), at the time of writing no research has been conducted on international community college students who have been affected by the war in Ukraine. This review, therefore, draws upon a somewhat larger, albeit nascent, literature on displaced students in higher education.

Challenges Faced by International Students Who Flee War

Migrants fall into several categories, each with varying levels of access to education, financial support, and other forms of assistance in the host country, as recent studies show (Stevenson & Baker, 2018; Buckner et al., 2017; Streitwieser et al., 2020). For instance, in Canada and Australia, individuals who are designated as asylum seekers and wish to pursue higher education are often categorized as international students and are charged tuition fees that are significantly higher than those paid by domestic students (Hartley et al., 2018; White, 2017). Ukrainians who come to Canada to escape the war are granted three-year temporary residency under the CUAET program, which offers extended temporary status to Ukrainians and their family members and allows them to work, study, and stay in Canada until it is safe for them to return home. They are obliged to pay international tuition fees, however. Even so, their experiences are similar to those of traditional refugees, defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as "people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country" (Javanbakht, 2022, p. 1).

Research indicates that refugees aspiring to pursue higher education in their host country encounter numerous challenges, such as (1) high tuition fees; (2) inability to provide required admission documents; (3) inadequate language skills; (4) insufficient social support; and (5) cultural adjustment challenges (Jungblut et al., 2020). Berg (2018), who studies the challenges experienced by refugee students, finds that, in addition to the standard difficulties, the key integration challenges for refugee university students are social isolation and psychological distress. Many refugees endure personal, material, and psychosocial losses, resulting in cumulative psychosocial stress, economic hardship, and lack of resources for

years after their displacement (Javanbakht, 2022). Such conditions often lead to severe emotional and physical consequences, particularly for young people (Turrini et al., 2019). Kurapov et al. (2023) have investigated the Russo-Ukrainian war's impact on Ukrainian students inside Ukraine. Of the 589 participants in their study, the overwhelming majority (97.8%) reported deterioration of their psycho-emotional state. Such deterioration includes depression (84.3%), exhaustion (86.7%), loneliness (51.8%), nervousness (84.4%), and anger (76.9%), with women being more affected than men. The participants also reported increased use of tobacco, alcohol, pain relievers, and sedatives, as well as loneliness, burnout, and lower resilience. Although Kurapov et al. (2023) focused on Ukrainians studying at Ukrainian universities, their research provides insight into the challenges that many other young Ukrainians may be facing, including those enrolled at Western colleges and universities.

Experiencing the horrors of war, especially at a young age, can lead to anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, suicide, guilt, anger, sadness, anguish, and loneliness (Júnior et al., 2022). Even though there is no up-to-date, comprehensive information on the conflict in Ukraine, some data suggest that the number of Ukrainians experiencing PTSD is consistent with that of refugee populations in previous conflicts (Javanbakht, 2022). Ben-Ezra et al. (2023) investigated PTSD rates among Ukrainian citizens living inside and outside Ukraine and found that those living outside the country, as well as those under the age of 16, girls, women, and those with a family member who had been wounded or killed in the conflict, were most likely to have PTSD. Chaaya et al. (2002) also found that adolescent refugees were likely to experience PTSD for an extended period. Research by Zimmerman et al. (2011) showed that female refugees are more susceptible to mental-health disorders than males.

Unfortunately, refugees and other displaced persons from Ukraine often hesitate to use mental-health services, even when they are offered free of charge. Several scholars have pointed out that post-communist states tend to stigmatize people with mental-health conditions and lack the Western tradition of mental-health services (Burlaka et al., 2017). In Ukraine, for example, individual mental-health needs have often been considered secondary to collective well-being (Rouhier-Willoughby, 2008). Burlaka et al. (2017) observed that Ukrainians with mental-health problems tend to avoid treatment, owing to stigma, cost, and poor quality of care.

Coping Strategies of International Students

The research indicates that young refugees strongly aspire to higher education. This proactive response helps them overcome traumatic experiences (Streitwieser et al., 2020). In their 2019 study, Harvey and Mallman delved into the experiences of new migrants, including individuals from refugee backgrounds, in Australian higher education. Their findings revealed that certain students use resistance capital to overcome previous negative experiences (Harvey & Mallman, 2019). Resistance capital can be defined as "those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005. p. 80). Harvey and Mallman (2019) suggest that engaging in acts of resistance can enhance marginalized students' confidence by compelling institutions to acknowledge and recognize their reality, which was previously denied. Within the context of their study, refugee students specifically resisted existing institutional norms. This concept may also extend to Ukrainians, whose attitude and response to the conflict helps them address traumatic experiences and achieve success in a college setting.

The research on refugees' resilience and the mechanisms they use to overcome the effects of trauma is extensive. Although not specific to international students, these studies offer valuable insight into the resilience and coping techniques of war-affected youth and students. Oviedo et al. (2022) studied the circumstances, states of mind, and coping mechanisms of refugees who left their home countries in search of security. Their findings point to a variety of coping and resilience strategies. Communication with family members in the home country and access to sufficient help in the host country were identified as key aspects of coping and resilience. Oviedo et al. (2022) also found that prior development of a rich spiritual life or the practice of prayer served as psychological capital that increased survivor resilience.

Długosz (2023) conducted research to assess the mental health and coping strategies of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, the country that is the main recipient of Ukrainians fleeing the war. His findings showed that, of 737 participants, 73% experienced depression, anxiety disorders, and PTSD. The data analysis revealed that women, younger participants, and refugees who could not speak Polish experienced higher levels of mental-health disorders. Długosz (2023) also identified two types of coping strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused strategies involve taking action to change the situation, to remove obstacles, or to eliminate their causes. The findings showed that participants who actively used problem-focused strategies scored better on the Refugee Health Screener-15 (a tool for screening refugees for emotional distress and mental health) than those who used emotion-focused strategies, such as praying, distracting

themselves, or taking sedatives. The highest levels of disorders were found among refugees whose attitude was one of resignation. The author concluded that mental-health issues are the main problem that could hinder Ukrainian refugees' adaptation, detracting from their overall health and quality of life (Długosz, 2023).

Hooberman et al. (2010) investigated the effect of resilience factors, coping style, social support, cognitive appraisals, and social comparisons on the severity of PTSD symptoms in 75 war survivors. Their results indicate that an emotion-focused disengagement style, such as social withdrawal, self-criticism, and downward comparisons, negatively affects resilience and increases the likelihood of severe symptoms. Other researchers (Jeavons et al., 2000; Punamaki et al., 2004) have also found that trauma survivors who use problem-focused coping strategies experience less suffering than those who employ emotion-focused strategies.

According to Berg (2018), who studies refugee students in Germany, supporting such students is frequently referred to in universities' internationalization strategies, yet is not truly prioritized. Their presence on campus is seen as beneficial to the entire student body, and some German universities have even created positions specifically designed to assist them. Even so, as Berg points out, often "counseling staff are just not qualified, and other [support] structures are necessary" (p. 231). More should be done to assist these students, who would benefit greatly from improved counseling, reduced tuition fees, and adequate living allowances. Moreover, Berg (2018) makes the case that universities should regard such students as eminently capable of success, in addition to focusing on their specific needs.

Theoretical Framework

All the participants in this study are international community college students who, in addition to facing numerous challenges common to all such students, must contend with the turmoil of war in their home country, forced migration, and resettlement in an unfamiliar environment. Such dramatic events may have a profound impact on an individual's mental health (Morina, 2018). To gain a comprehensive yet focused understanding of their experience, this study examines the phenomenon from two perspectives: the participants' internal abilities to cope and the resources available to them. To that end, two complementary theories are used.

The psychological resilience theory (Werner, 1989) provides an effective lens for an examination of the first research question, emphasizing an individual's mental and emotional capacity to cope with adversity. Such an approach has been used widely to explore the experiences of refugees and other displaced persons (e.g., Cicchetti, 2010; Bonanno et al., 2011; Morina, 2018). In the context of this study, the psychological resilience theory elucidates how internal factors, such as self-esteem, self-regulation, and positivity, may influence the participants' level of resilience.

In parallel, the social support theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985) highlights the significance of external factors, such as relationships with family, friends, and community members, as well as access to resources and opportunities for dealing with trauma (Kliewer et al., 2021; Southwick et al, 2014). This theory helps investigate the second research question, which seeks to understand how the participants access resources and support to deal with their challenges.

Methodology

Method

The study used a qualitative research approach, with interviews as the primary method of data collection. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on a large participant pool to achieve statistical representativeness and to make generalizations to the entire population (Wright & Marsden, 2010), qualitative research aims to explore, to comprehend, and to gain insight into new phenomena by examining a relatively small number of cases (Merriam, 2009). In traditional quantitative research, generalizability is determined by the likelihood that patterns observed in a sample will also be present in the broader population from which the sample is drawn, whereas in qualitative research, generalizability depends on the probability that ideas and theories developed in one context will also be applicable in other settings (Crowther & Lancaster, 2012). Thus, the study findings provide insight into the experiences of international students from other areas affected by humanitarian and geopolitical crises.

Research Site

The study was conducted in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) at a prominent Canadian community college with a highly diverse student population comprising international, recent-immigrant, and domestic students. Canada's status as a highly developed, bilingual country draws immigrants from around the globe. The GTA's large population, robust, diverse economy, and favorable economic conditions provide international students with a sense of confidence that they can secure desirable employment opportunities after graduation.

At the time of writing, the college had more than 30,000 students, roughly 50% of them international, as well as several departments dedicated to serving international students, such as recruitment, admissions, and student services. In the 2021-2022 academic year, its population of international Ukrainian students was one of the largest among Canadian community colleges. Thus, the research site offered an ideal setting to explore the experiences of newcomers who had fled geopolitical and humanitarian crises and were pursuing a community college education. The college offers a wide variety of programs ranging from one-year certificates to four-year applied degrees.

Participant Recruitment

Notices inviting international students from Ukraine to take part in the project were posted near the international student service departments at several campuses. Ten students expressed an interest in the study. One of the students, although ethnic Ukrainian, was born in Canada and thus did not qualify for the study. Accordingly, nine students were interviewed. The study sought to include individuals who had a wide range of experiences but were affected by the war in one way or another.

Participants

All the participants were Ukrainian nationals who possessed a study permit and were enrolled in a full-time college program. Furthermore, they self-identified as individuals affected by the war. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' demographic data.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic, Educational, and Employment Data

Pseudonym	Gender	Date of Arrival	Age on Arrival	Age at Interview	Home-town	Status in Canada	Employed
Valentyna	F	Aug 2021	17	20	Odesa	CUAET	Yes
Petro	M	Dec 2021	19	21	Kyiv	CUAET	Yes
Khrystyna	F	Jan 2022	19	21	Kyiv	CUAET	Yes
Hanna	F	Jan 2022	20	22	Luhansk	CUAET	Yes
Myroslava	F	Sept 2022	20	21	Lviv	CUAET	Yes
Nataliia	F	Aug 2022	20	21	Odesa	CUAET	Yes
Taras	M	Sept 2021	17	19	Zhytomyr	CUAET	Yes
Olha	F	May 2022	17	18	Donetsk	CUAET	Yes
Halyna	F	Aug 2021	18	20	Luhansk	CUAET	Yes

Of the nine students who took part in the study, seven were women and two were men. All were single with an average age of 19 at the time of the interview. It is notable that none were mature students. The researchers know, from their substantial experience with international college students, that the college previously had a much larger number of mature Ukrainian students. This situation may be due to a law prohibiting Ukrainian men between 18 and 60 from leaving the country but it does not explain why there were no mature women in the sample.

It is also notable that September 2022 was the participants' last date of arrival. Six of them arrived in Canada before February 24, 2022, when the major phase of the war started. The two men in the study arrived before the war started and the travel restrictions were put in place. The participants came from various parts of Ukraine; three were from territories occupied by the Russian Federation.

All used the CUAET program, which enables qualified Ukrainian nationals to acquire both a study permit and an open work permit. International students are typically allowed to work off campus for no more than 20 hours a week. The CUAET program, however, affords them the opportunity to work full-time and to receive government funding. As a result, even the participants who initially arrived in Canada on a study permit before the CUAET program was introduced (there were six such students), subsequently applied for and received CUAET status.

Data Collection

The empirical data for the study were gathered through in-depth, semi structured interviews, which allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the participants' experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and perceptions. The interview consisted of three parts. In part one, information on the participants' demographics was collected. In parts two and three, the participants answered a series of questions on their psychological challenges and sources of support.

The interviewees, all of whom were native speakers of Ukrainian or Russian, or spoke both, had the opportunity to speak the language of their choice. All elected to use English but occasionally switched to Ukrainian to express certain nuances. The interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes, with both researchers taking part. After each interview, they reviewed the collected information to reach a consensus on its meaning. As a result, six participants were asked to provide additional information or clarification. Two of the six were contacted for further clarification.

Data Coding and Analysis

To ensure a comprehensive analysis, two distinct rounds of data coding were conducted. In the initial phase, thematic coding was used to identify the main themes. Even though various themes emerged, their selection was guided by the research questions and the study's theoretical framework, with a specific focus on the concepts of individual resilience to adverse events and of social support. Subsequently, pattern coding was used to distill common and recurring patterns within these themes. Both rounds of coding were performed manually to engage with the data at the deepest level possible. To ensure high-quality analysis, the researchers independently coded and analyzed the data before comparing their results to establish a consensus on the emerging themes and data patterns.

Ethical Considerations

It was expected that some research participants might experience emotional distress when recalling traumatic experiences. Unfortunately, alternative approaches to data collection were not feasible because direct interaction with people affected by war is necessary to gain insights into their experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies. It is crucial, however, to strike a balance between gathering meaningful data and minimizing potential harm to the interviewees. Accordingly, several strategies were used.

All participants received detailed information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, and potential risks before giving consent. The interview questions were shared with them in advance, so that they could make an informed decision about their involvement. Additionally, the participants were free to decline to answer any question, and they were entitled to withdraw from the study at any point. They answered the interview questions on the telephone, at home or in other safe locations. In this way, a secure environment was ensured throughout the interview process and the participants could disengage at any point if they so wished.

Furthermore, the participants were provided with information about available support resources, including counseling services and helplines. They were encouraged to seek assistance if they experienced any psychological discomfort during or after the interview. They were also assured that their data would be handled with the utmost confidentiality and anonymized to safeguard their privacy and to prevent potential stigmatization or re-traumatization.

Positionality Statement

The researchers are naturalized Canadians originally from areas affected by the war. They are intimately acquainted with the situation, having themselves been affected by the trauma of war or the fear of persecution. The one researcher came to Canada as an international student and the other as a refugee. Both have extensive experience in assisting international

Ukrainian CAAT students and other Ukrainian newcomers to Canada with academic, settlement, and immigration matters. They have completed a Mental Health First Aid program. Thus, their experience, expertise, background, and values provide a powerful lens for an examination of the experiences of international college students affected by humanitarian and geopolitical crises.

Subjectivity Statement

The researchers are from the same culture as the research participants or a similar culture, and have lived through similar experiences. Their closeness to the topic under investigation places them in the position of insiders, or someone studying a group to which he himself belongs (Breen, 2007). Insider researchers have the obvious advantage of possessing special insight into their subject matter and the ability to provide vital cultural context by interpreting meanings held by research participants (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). At the same time, such closeness may diminish the researchers' objectivity, preventing them from probing the participants sufficiently during data collection and leading to assumptions that distort the findings (McLoughlin, 2011).

To minimize personal biases that could affect the findings, the researchers used a reflexivity technique, which is defined as a process whereby a researcher "engage[s] in continuous self-critique and self-appraisal and explain[s] how his or her own experience has or has not influenced the stages of the research process" (Koch & Harrington, 1998, cited in Dowling, 2006. p. 8). The approach to reflexivity used in this study is based on two strategies identified by Roulston (2010): keeping a researcher journal and critically analyzing one's own performance as an interviewer.

Limitations of the Study

The study's narrow focus prevented a more thorough examination of the subject. Additionally, the study is based on a specific context, which limits the extent to which the findings can be used.

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Findings

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The findings are presented in three sections; the first two address the first research question and the third addresses the second research question. The data review was based on the study's overarching theoretical framework. Multiple noteworthy patterns emerged from the responses to each research question.

Mental-health Challenges

Several factors affected the mental wellbeing of the study participants. All reported varying degrees of mental stress, with the primary source being concerns and anxiety regarding their relatives in Ukraine. Some of their family members were in ill health, had lost property or income, or were unable to escape the conflict. These concerns had a profound impact on their emotional state, impeding their ability to concentrate on their studies and to adapt successfully to their new environment.

For instance, Valentyna, aged 20, arrived in Canada when she was 17, only a few months before the full-scale war began. Unfortunately, her parents were trapped in Ukraine because men under the age of 60 are prohibited from leaving the country and their spouses tend to stay with them. The prospect that her father could be mobilized and sent to the front heightened her distress. As a result, the war had a transformative effect on her worldview:

> My view of the world has changed completely because, I don't rely anymore on anyone except myself and my family. That's the people I can rely on, and I just don't feel I can rely on anyone else. I don't feel protected and stable anymore. I feel that there is always some threat. It is like my life changed on February 24th. I feel like I'm expecting something bad to happen at any time. All the time, I don't feel safe. Yes, I know it is not real. It is emotional. But I feel fear. My old world is gone. My confidence is on the ground. Part of me has vanished. You know, like, I try to predict, to protect, to think ahead before something happens. I think it's because I, like, I grew up faster since the war started. So, when I was 17, I thought, "Oh, this life, like, everything is clear, everything is perfect." But then when the war started, I just stopped being naive. Like, yeah, that was the big change. I stopped being naive.

When another participant, Khrystyna, aged 21, was asked whether the situation in Ukraine had affected her wellbeing, she retorted:

My wellbeing? You must be kidding! First of all, my dad, he can't come visit me. That's what bothers me the most: that I can't see my parents unless I go to Ukraine. We don't meet, and I can't go because I have no money. So, this feeling that something is impossible, it really bothers me. Yeah, just like obstacles. You can't leave the country's borders. For me personally, it's difficult. And also, like, my emotional spectrum, it became wider; like, I never knew that I could be so angry. My mood is changing constantly. So, and sometimes it became more difficult to control my emotions. It is like there is a conflict inside me. Conflicts inside me and, of course, thoughts about the safety of my parents, the safety of my friends. I worry constantly, feeling that I'm helpless, that I can't affect things. I can't change anything because they all are there, and I'm here, and, no matter what I do, I can't help them. This feeling of helplessness is horrifying.

Several participants said they experienced feelings of loneliness that were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and a lack of social-support networks. Here is how Valentyna, described her situation:

For me, the most difficult thing was that I was totally alone. Like, I came here when I was 17 and I remember the first time I was sick. I was so terrified that I'm not familiar with the medical system, and no one will help me.… It is better when you have some relatives or friends before you come to Canada because building it from the start, it's very challenging and risky. So, for me, the most challenge was being alone.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the students' social interactions, greatly limiting their opportunities for face-to-face conversations and exacerbating their sense of isolation. Furthermore, the absence of peers with whom they could talk openly about their situation made it more difficult for them to manage their emotions and to develop effective coping strategies. Some reported that their interactions with others occasionally led to misunderstandings. Factors such as cultural differences, language barriers, and limited awareness of the students' backgrounds may have contributed to their alienation and frustration, as expressed by Valentyna:

Many people were, like, "Of course, we are ready to support." They … knew what was going on, but then there were a lot of people who would say to me, "Why can't Ukraine just give the territories to Russia? And there will be peace." Often, when I said that I am from Ukraine, people would say, like, "Isn't Ukraine a part of Russia?" or something like that. Or they would ask me, "Do you hate Russians?" Uh, so I had to explain it again and again. And it was so difficult for me emotionally. And I think that it's an educational role of the college. The college should have done something, some education activity, so people know what's going on and they know how to talk to me.

Such misunderstandings may impede their integration into the local community and introduce additional stressors, undermining their mental wellbeing. A key finding is that all the participants acknowledged the need for psychological support. Surprisingly, however, none of them had sought assistance despite the college's numerous announcements about the availability of such services. Their hesitancy to seek help can be attributed to various factors, the first being the stigma surrounding counseling. When Hanna, aged 22, was asked about her reasons for not using counseling services, she gave the following explanation:

I mean, they did provide some counseling but, like, they call it mental counseling. When you come from back home, like, you think that counselors deal with, like, depression, which is the disease of silent people who have nothing else to worry about. I didn't want to use them because it's lame! Because it's not real! It's just whatever. Like, I mean, I don't need psycho counseling.

Some participants said their inability to express complex ideas and feelings in English was also a barrier to seeking professional help. "I cannot explain because of English. At the beginning of war, the language problem, problem when you talk about difficult [matters] … and you're, like, 'How to explain it?' So, I even never try," Khrystyna explained. Some participants were not accustomed to online counseling, as Petro, aged 21, explained:

Counselors? So, I didn't use them. Psychological help support, they had it online. I don't like online formats. So, I don't use them. No, to be honest. So, how can you see a counselor in an online format? In my personal opinion, psychological sessions should be going in person.

The most significant factor was the participants' reluctance to seek help from counselors from a different cultural background. A comment by Myroslava, aged 21, exemplified this attitude:

I felt like I was too tired. I really didn't have any energy, and I know that the counselor wouldn't be Ukrainian. It would be just a psychologist who tell me not to worry. What can they know about how I feel?

When asked whether she would be willing to consult a counselor of Ukrainian descent, she replied, "Absolutely." Thus, the students preferred to seek assistance from professionals with an understanding of their distinct experiences, values, and culture.

Financial Worries

In addition to psychological hardships, all the study participants emphasized the considerable financial challenges they faced after fleeing the conflict in Ukraine. The families of several participants had lost jobs, and some from the eastern part of the country had lost property; thus, they were unable to provide adequate financial support for their children's education. Hanna, who is from Luhansk, recounted what happened to her family in 2022:

My grandpa got a heart attack because a bomb exploded some three houses away from his. We had a lot of investments. We had multiple pieces of land, we had multiple properties, like, before the war started. My parents bought a nice two-bedroom apartment in downtown for some $40,000 at a time. But they sold it for some $4,000 two years later. Somewhat a little bit after that, my grandpa was selling his house for small price. So, we lost all the investments and properties and, like, whatever value, like, invested we had, we lost it.

The participants further reported that they experienced difficulties transferring money from their Ukrainian banks to Canada because of the government's decision to put limitations on transactions during the war, thus preventing an outflow of funds from the country. Consequently, the students were under tremendous pressure to find employment so that they could sustain themselves and their educational pursuits. All the participants said they worked; but, with limited social networks and no Canadian credentials or work experience, their options were limited to low-paying service or manual-labor jobs. "There are many jobs in Toronto but they mostly low-pay jobs. New rule allows work full-time.… So, I, like, work three part-time jobs to pay for everything," Nataliia, aged 21, explained.

Coping Mechanisms

As noted, all the participants reported mental-health or financial challenges, if not both. In response, they used various coping techniques. Notably, all expressed a strong desire to connect with fellow countrymen going through similar experiences. Although students from other cultural backgrounds sympathized, they were unable to comprehend fully the specific nature of the participants' problems and to meet their needs. Despite the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the college to shift all classes and activities to online platforms, several of the participants managed to find ways to connect with other Ukrainian students, including Valentyna:

Before the war, I wanted to meet people from other cultures. Suddenly, I had this strong feeling that I need Ukrainians around me. To talk to them, to discuss, just to be with them. I tried to do something myself. I created the Ukrainian Student Club. I started making some events on my own, like, totally by myself, trying to bring the information to the college, inform, like, giving information about the war.

Other participants engaged with the broader Ukrainian community, collecting donations, finding accommodation for newly arrived Ukrainian migrants and helping them get settled, and doing other volunteer work. Others worked long hours to avoid thinking about the situation, as did Petro:

Going to school and working 40 hours a week allows me not to think about kind of emotional problems, 100% That's what saved me. Yes, I just don't have time to think. Like, I had assigned 15 minutes a day to read the news, to understand, and then I had to go to work. Yeah, it's good. Good coping mechanism.

Assistance Received

The participants were asked to reflect on the support and aid they received from their college, the government, and Canadian society. All were granted a $2,000 one-time bursary by the college to alleviate their financial burdens. They were also given access to counseling, although it transpired that none used this resource. Other forms of assistance included flexible accommodation in student residences, help with finding on-campus employment, and emotional support from faculty and staff members. The federal government extended a $3,000 one-time allowance to all Ukrainian migrants in Canada who had fled the war. Moreover, some Ukrainian students were granted an open work permit (OWP), which authorized them to work full-time in Canada for three years. International students in Canada are usually allowed to work only 20 hours a week while studying at the postsecondary level (Government of Canada, 2024c). It should be noted, however, that the work experience they gain while studying full-time does not count toward permanent residency.

Ukrainians with relatives in Canada can apply for permanent residency (Government of Canada, 2023). It is important to note, however, that this policy does not cover the majority of international students, who do not have relatives in Canada. Several participants said they had received support from the Ukrainian-Canadian community. Such assistance included clothing and food, help with formalities, and help finding an apartment.

Discussion

Previous studies have demonstrated that refugee university students (e.g., Berg, 2018) and other types of refugees (e.g., Javanbakht, 2022) often experience serious mental-health problems. This research contributes to an understanding of the experiences of a unique group of migrants: Ukrainians who were given three-year sanctuary in Canada owing to the war in their country and subsequently enrolled in a community college as international students.

In line with previous research (e.g., Burlaka et al., 2017), the participants in this study were hesitant to seek help from mental-health specialists, even when such services were offered free of charge. The main obstacle was reluctance to share their feelings with counselors from a different culture. Another impediment was the stigma that their culture attaches to seeking treatment for mental-health issues. Accordingly, the problems experienced by such students may go untreated, a situation that points up the need for more resources to support refugee students and those who have had traumatic experiences, as discussed by Berg (2018).

In response to the growing number, and the paramount importance, of international students, CAATs have been developing various internationalization plans, strategies, and policies to reflect the new reality. For example, one of the largest community colleges in Canada describes its approach to international students as follows: "Our services and community are here to support you and make sure you have everything you need to feel confident and comfortable on your new adventure" (Humber College, 2024, p.17). As the findings of this study indicate, however, such initiatives may not always adequately address the specific needs of certain groups of international students. These findings are in line with those of other studies. For example, Barone and Unangst (2023) analyzed how internationalization is practiced by American and Canadian community colleges and found that, despite the inclusion of such strategies in institutional policies, support for some programs vital to international students, such as mobility and language training, was lacking. They also found that colleges' internationalization strategies tended to focus on quantitative goals, rather than qualitative aspects of intercultural activities (Barone & Unangst, 2023).

The number of students fleeing geopolitical and humanitarian crises is not expected to decrease; thus, colleges and other institutions need to provide more support to such students. Various researchers have identified numerous strategies that help refugees cope, and this study corroborates and expands on their findings. Streitwieser et al., (2020) observed that younger refugees often exhibit a stronger desire for higher education, which helps them deal with traumatic experiences. In this study, an illustrative example was provided by Olha, an 18-year-old from Donetsk, who said she "studied all the time not to think about the problems back home."

The current research also contributes to the literature on resilience as a mechanism for overcoming the effects of trauma. Such resilience can be conceptualized as active opposition to dominant power. For instance, native American

students may oppose a Euro-centric curriculum imposed on them (Alabanza, 2020). In the Ukrainian context, the concept of resilience was expressed well by Taras, age 19, from Zhytomyr:

> So, before the war started, I was not so good at history. But after the war started, I really tried to learn something new from the history of Ukraine. Before the war, I had some Russian language videos on YouTube, but after the war started, I blocked all Russian. Like Russian language. And now I only watch English and Ukrainian videos. So, basically, before the war started, as we know there was kind of assimilation between Russia and Ukrainians, it was kind of brothers, uh, at media and so on. But if you read something from the history, you understand the difference and … why it was kind of a simulation of this. But no, I am Ukrainian and when I know it, it helps me.

The objective of this study was to investigate the experiences of Ukrainian international community college students affected by the ongoing war in their country as they tried to integrate into the college community and the Canadian labor market. The study's contribution to this objective is two-fold, namely theoretical and substantive. The study's main contribution to the psychological resilience theory (Werner, 1989) is that a group of individuals who are from the same culture and of similar age and upbringing can take drastically different approaches to coping with trauma. As for the social support theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985), the study findings show that social support is most effective when matched with an individual's cultural and personal needs.

Overall, this research adds to the literature on international students and refugees who have escaped geopolitical and humanitarian crises in their countries. The findings may help colleges and other higher education institutions assist such students more effectively. From a societal standpoint, the study contributes to a better understanding of the challenges encountered by international students, many of whom plan to stay in Canada after graduation as permanent residents, and how they can be supported more efficaciously.

The study was conducted at only one, albeit large, CAAT. For a broader perspective, a similar study could be conducted at several colleges, including smaller ones, and at universities. It is also important to obtain a longer-term perspective on the participants' experiences and outcomes. Furthermore, students from other countries affected by humanitarian and geopolitical crises, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Venezuela, can be studied with a similar methodology. Moreover, other theoretical frameworks can be used to examine this topic from a variety of perspectives.

Conclusion

Even though all the study participants were Ukrainian international community college students affected by the war in their country, the findings highlight the need for community colleges to provide special support to all international students who go through geopolitical and humanitarian crises.

To address the mental-health challenges of international students who have experienced trauma in their home countries, colleges need to provide accessible, culturally sensitive counseling services. Given that international students come from a wide variety of countries, it may not be feasible to have counselors and other support personnel from all ethnic groups. A possible solution may be to collaborate with government agencies and local community organizations to ensure that students are aware of mental-health assistance, government grants and allowances, settlement assistance, legal aid, and other community support programs. Colleges also need to promote the value of mental-health support and to address misconceptions so that students can overcome the stigma associated with counseling.

International students in distress can connect with one another by establishing student clubs and other organizations so that they can share their experiences, support one another, and hold informational events related to their culture and country. Furthermore, colleges can establish peer-support programs whereby students who have experienced traumatic situations but have successfully integrated into college life and Canadian society can mentor and guide students in need. Such initiatives can help them cope with traumatic experiences.

An essential feature of a well-functioning multicultural society is its citizens' cultural awareness and cultural education; therefore, it is vital that colleges enhance educational initiatives and programs to increase cultural awareness and understanding among the wider college community. The approaches can include workshops, presentations, and activities that provide insight into the history, culture, and situation of a country in turmoil so as to foster a more empathetic, inclusive environment. By implementing these suggestions, community colleges can play a crucial role in supporting such students, helping them overcome their challenges and achieve their educational and personal goals.

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