
Resilience Building in the Time of the Corona Virus

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Introduction

This article reports on the experience of implementation and conclusion of a doctoral research on the relation between learning the English language and increasing resilience in refugee children and youths.

I discuss the difficulties faced by a Ph.D. student from the University of Messina conducting studies in resilience building for refugee and IDP youths in the camps of Duhok Governorate, Autonomous Kurdistan (Northern Iraq). The project was to be concluded onsite in the IDP and Syrian refugee camps during the month of April, 2020 but was blocked due to the COVID-19 emergency. The doctoral research had to be restructured completely. Here, I discuss various challenges created by the COVID-19 virus, including cross-cultural relationship building, cultural blocks, data collection and communication and logistics. The struggle to find viable solutions, finish the job and finally conclude the project could be considered a hands-on example of what the research itself deals with: how to build resilience in adverse conditions. Some observations on resilience itself and how important it has been and will continue to be during the COVID-19 crisis are offered.

What is resilience? It has many definitions. But the definition of resilience as ‘the ability to positively adapt and thrive in the face of risk and adversity’ (Kong 2015, Masten et al. 2009) is very appropriate for this case.

Although this research defined itself as a pedagogical-psychological study, it ended up sharing many aspects of an anthropological research project. This was due to the very nature of the research, at first based on participant observation and at last being very dependent on the ability of the researcher to ‘adjust and adapt to unforeseen circumstances’ (Prato 2012: 80). In retrospect, it was totally in agreement with Prato (2012) who pointed out that anthropological research ends up “‘crossing” disciplinary, classificatory and spatial boundaries’ (Pardo and Prato 2012: 16).

In the fall of 2019, I went to Duhok, Autonomous Kurdistan, Northern Iraq for five weeks. I was hosted by the University of Duhok, in Duhok City, in Autonomous Kurdistan, which is located in northern Iraq. The University was able to obtain a blanket pass from the Kuhok Governorate to go to any of the refugee and IDP camps in the area. I visited several before I selected the Sheikhan IDP Camp and the Domitz Refugee Camp to conduct the research. Sheikhan IDP camp is populated by Yazidis, and Domitz Camp hosts Syrian refugees who are mostly of Kurdish language and culture. I immediately bonded with the children in both camps as well as with their tutors, teachers and caregivers. I was kindly hosted by the NGO VOP.FAM (<http://vopiraq.org/>) at the Sheikhan Camp, and by the NGO Gashbun at the Domitz Camp (<https://www.facebook.com/Gashbun.NGO/>). I started the research but the time flew by.

There were many logistical problems and linguistic, cultural and also gender challenges. It took a significant amount of time to make the contacts, form the relationships, find the right methods and finally carry out the research. It was a huge challenge even to find a place to make photocopies, and buying instructional materials was next to impossible. Transport back and forth to the camps was difficult and time-consuming.

One basic problem was gender, which exerted both positive and negative influences (Prato 2012). Because I was a foreign woman alone, I needed to be ‘taken care of’, and consequently had to work with the schedules of the NGO personnel which sometimes interrupted my research. The fact that I was a foreign woman alone going into the camps, not knowing the language was challenging. On the positive side, it was probably easier for me to establish relationships with people, being of a certain age as well as a female that needed to ‘be taken care of’ (I ended up being adopted by many Kurdish families and came back 6 kilos heavier). Having an Italian passport with an American cultural-linguistic identity was intriguing for the people, and on top of that being a woman alone who just ‘showed up’ seemed to inspire in them a sense of protection and respect. Everybody I met was very happy that a Westerner went against all the government travel advisories (both U.S.A. and Italian) and ignored the common belief that going to Iraq was asking to get kidnapped by a terrorist group. However, the fact that although ISIS had supposedly been defeated and the Peshmerga were extremely vigilant with frequent checkpoints, it was still slightly nerve-racking. But my research got off to a good start. I realized early on that I would have to return to Iraq because the pace was different, it took longer to find contacts, develop relationships, understand cultural interactions, and so on

I started my research but I needed to come back. I fell in love with the children, the people, the culture, and the place, too. The five weeks flew by, I cried all the way to home, and swore I would be back. I kept my promise, I bought a ticket for 900 euros in February, and a graduate student also decided to come with me, assist me and start her thesis research as well.

Results of the Covid-19 Virus

We have a very full schedule planned, including meetings, conferences and university teaching. I was also due to meet with three English teachers who participated in my research and were due to give me the pre-and post-test copies so I could process them for a statistical analysis. Then I was supposed to go to the two camps and teach some courses to different levels of students for two weeks and meet with the Director of the Health Ministry, the Director of the Psychology department and the Medical School and Veterinary Faculties. Fortunately, I had negotiated an MOU agreement (general agreement to do research, exchanges and projects between our two universities) and we were all excited because there were some education and development projects that we wanted to try to work on for funding. I was going to meet as many professors as possible and match them up with research partners from my University. Additionally, I was going to do some presentations of my University to promote exchange and

to get new students. Plus, I was going to take my graduate student friend around so she could start studying human rights issues there.

When the Covid-29 lockdown started in Italy, we began watching the Italian Foreign Ministry site every five minutes. To our chagrin, first Baghdad shut its doors to Italians. Then Kurdistan also! We were absolutely heartbroken.

Logistical Blocks

I wracked my brain about what to do. I decided to offer English courses online. I opened a YouTube channel called '*English for Resilience*'. My friend in the camp who through all of these problems has been steadfast and supportive told me sadly that the people in the camps do not have a good internet connection, and most of them do not have internet access at all, at least for long periods like the hour for an English lesson. It was also not possible to get some of the online programs we were using in Italy; Skype was possible but not reliable there due to the connection, Zoom was unknown and Microsoft Teams out of the question. And watching a YouTube channel was impossible.

Because I could not be there physically, tracking students with a *before* and *after* analysis and conducting interviews became impossible. I was still hoping that the English teachers who were originally helping me would be able to do the ending survey and send both beginning and ending surveys to me somehow. But at the time of writing Iraq is still under lockdown and the schools have been closed for the last four months. A one professor took 184 *whatsapp* photos of the survey and sent them to me, but it still was not enough.

Creation of the Survey

Once again, I had to re-invent my research method. It was changed to try to link statistically English as a way to build resilience through a survey which was sent to as many camps as possible. My Ph.D. supervisor came to my rescue by helping me to create a statistically normed survey that we put online. It was easily accessible, took about three minutes to complete and was available from either a computer or a mobile phone.

Cultural and Linguistic Blocks

Besides the fact that I could not physically go back to Iraq, I also felt my inability to speak Kurdish or Arabic even more strongly than when I was there. The survey had to be translated into Kurdish. I had to rely completely on the relationships I had formed in five short weeks last year. I sent the survey for translation to my friend in one part of Iraq, then realized the Kurdish spoken there was not the same as that spoken in the camps in Duhok. So, I sent the translation to a professor in Duhok, who kindly fixed it to be the right kind of Kurdish. Then, I discovered that the people in the camps were unable to read and write Kurdish, although they spoke it. This was due to the Arabization policy started by Saddam Hussein that continues to this day, which has denied most of the people in the camps the opportunity to learn to read and write in Kurdish.

The survey had to be done again in Arabic. All these activities took up the last three months of my research time, and as the deadline for the thesis drew closer, things became more and more stressful because I did not have the research conclusions or proof that learning English increased resilience in refugee children. Fortunately, the Kurds, and especially the people I met, are very generous and willing to help me as much as possible.

Solution

It was hard to communicate what I needed by email or phone calls, and distributing the surveys was extremely daunting. This is where my groundwork in setting up relationships came through to help me. The kind tutor, Maher al-Issa, at the Sheikhan IDP Camp, came to my rescue and went around to all of the children in the camp during lockdown. He gathered more than enough surveys for a statistical sample. He used his own phone and time to do this and would not hear of being paid.

Success at the Last Minute

At the last minute, the statistical analysis was conducted, the first draft of the thesis was finished and I was amazed to see that my research actually showed a connection between learning English and increasing resilience in refugee children! It was what I had set out to do! The survey is still open online and I have more than doubled my participants. The research conclusions are holding steady.

In looking back over the process of doing this doctoral research during the time of the Covid-19 virus, I realize that I was actually living my thesis: building resilience to overcome adversity; thrive in difficult circumstances. It was like what Anne Deveson said in her book on resilience: ‘What begins as a quest to understand the extraordinary has revealed the power of the ordinary. Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in minds, brains and bodies’ (Deveson 2003: 38).

Somehow, I found a way to use the everyday magic of relationship building, creative problem solving, believing in something important, find out something important. The actual components of resilience. And I survived, and so did my thesis.

The relationships I made were the key to finishing my thesis. As far as being able to establish the necessary relationships to carry out research, I completely agree with Giuliana B. Prato when she says ‘[...] no matter how “prepared” we think we are, the success of the fieldwork ultimately depends on the fieldworker as a person who interacts with other persons, who evaluates situations as they happen, and to say the least, adjusts to changes and adapts to unforeseen circumstances’ (2012: 80).

I think that the current situation of the world facing the Covid-19 is similar to my thesis saga. We have to build strong relationships, employ creative problem solving, be persistent, maintain our hope for the future and believe in something bigger. If we are able to do this, we

will not only be successful, but come out as better people and the world will be wiser and stronger for it.

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