Time and Resilience in the Refugee Experiences: Insights from Italy and Germany

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Abstract

Research on migration consistently highlights resilience as a key factor for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Yet, little is known about how resilience varies across different age groups and its relationship to the length of stay in the host country. This study compares the Italian and German contexts to examine the role of time in shaping refugees' resilience, focusing on whether high resilience differs by age at interview and whether it is associated with duration of residence. A logit model accounted for within-cluster correlation by nationality and controlled for factors that potentially enhance or undermine resilience (e.g., family relationships, labour market participation, social networks, experiences of discrimination). The analysis draws on the first two waves of the SOEP-IAB-BAMF survey and the Italian Refugees and Asylum Seekers Survey (ITRAS). Findings indicate that younger refugees exhibit lower levels of resilience than adults, and that, after controlling for other factors, longer residence in the host country is associated with lower resilience. This pattern suggests a possible "resilience deterioration" whereby prolonged exposure to stressors gradually erodes adaptive capacity. These results underscore the need for targeted policies that support both younger refugees and long-term residents in preserving and strengthening individual agency, sustaining personal resources, and enhancing resilience, through integrated efforts in social integration, community engagement, and mental-health support.

1. Introduction and theoretical background

Migration studies increasingly recognise resilience as a critical dimension for understanding refugees' adaptation and well-being (Lindert et al., 2023). Despite facing significant adversity before, during, and after resettlement, many refugees demonstrate a remarkable capacity to cope with deprivation and survive under challenging circumstances (Tiong, 2006). While narratives of trauma are pervasive in refugee experiences (Papadopoulos, 2001), the majority of survivors do not develop severe mental disorders, emphasising the protective role of resilience (Rosner et al., 2003).

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Contrasting with the historical deficit model that portrays refugees as vulnerable and traumatised and focuses on mental disorders, this research adopts a strength-based perspective, viewing them instead as capable, resourceful, active survivors with the capacity for healing, growth, agency, and adaptive potential (Alachkar, 2023).

The study of migrants often involves the concepts of favourable *migration selectivity* and the *exhausted migrant effect*. The initial advantage of being positively selected (e.g., being more motivated and educated) diminishes over time, particularly with increasing length of stay, due to exposure to cumulative disadvantages, such as social exclusion, discrimination, and precarious housing conditions (Ferrara et al., 2024). The extent to which refugees benefit from positive selection remains contested, with some suggesting an advantage in educational attainment and predicted earnings (Aksoy & Poutvaara, 2021; Berding-Barwick & McAreavey, 2024), while others contend that the assumed advantage of superior health conditions upon arrival may not hold for refugees (Mendola & Busetta, 2025; Busetta et al., 2024).

In relation to resilience dynamics, one could posit that a relatively low level of resilience at the point of arrival (a "refugee-entry effect") is gradually restored through the accumulation of human capital. Conversely, it is also plausible that newly arrived refugees exhibit high innate or latent resilience, owing to an initial sense of relief and the motivation to rebuild their lives. This study try to disentangle the specific temporal patterns of resilience. In particular, it examines (a) whether resilience differs by age at the time of interview and (b) whether it is associated with length of stay in Italy and Germany. The cross-country comparison is particularly informative given the striking differences in reception and integration policies.

2. Data and methodology

This study compares the Italian and German contexts using the SOEP-IAB-BAMF German survey and the Italian Refugees and Asylum Seekers Survey (ITRAS). The IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees includes first-time respondents who entered Germany and applied for asylum or temporary protection between 2013 and 2017 (Brücker et al., 2021). Interviews were conducted in 2016 and 2017 (M3-M4 and M5). In this survey, resilience is measured at the first interview using a simplified 4-item scale derived from the Brief Resilient Coping Scale (Sinclair & Wallston, 2004; Richter et al., 2013) on a 7-point Likert scale, capturing the perceived ability to manage adversity, control reactions, grow from challenges, and compensate for life losses. The Italian data were collected through the ITalian Refugees and Asylum Seekers Survey (ITRAS), conducted in 2024. The target population consisted of individuals aged 18 or older with a valid or recently expired residence permit for protection or asylum requests, who had resided in Italy for at least six months but not before 2011. In the Italian survey, resilience is measured using two items assessing adaptation to changes and recovery from difficulties on a 5-point Likert scale.

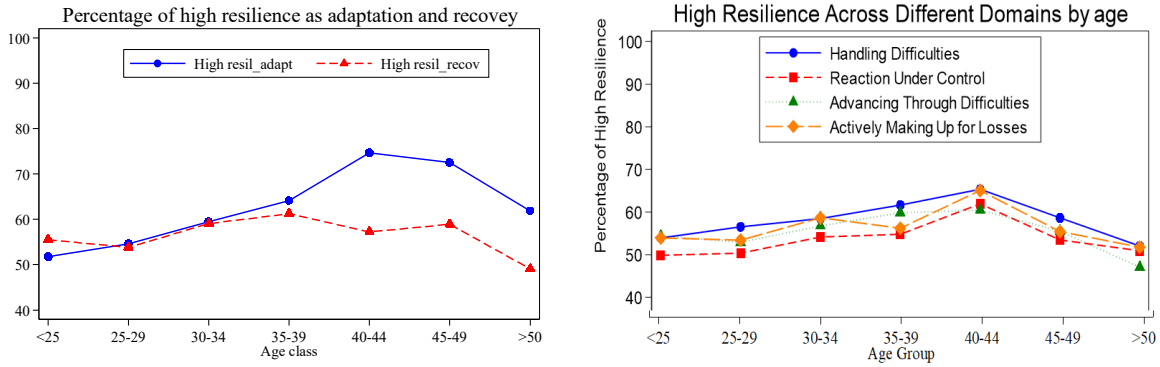
In the German working sample (comprising approximately 5,400 adults), around 60% of participants selected the highest level of agreement with all four resilience items. In the Italian sample (approximately 1,000 individuals), around 25% of participants are considered highly resilient. Descriptive analysis revealed a similar inverted "U"-shaped pattern of crude

resilience across age groups in both countries (Fig. 1). Resilience is lowest among younger individuals (under 25 years old) and those aged 50 and over, peaking in mid-adulthood (around 35-44 years old). Descriptively, no consistent pattern emerged in the Italian data when examining resilience by years since arrival, and the pattern was less pronounced in Germany.

Six logistic regression models were implemented (four for Germany and two for Italy), one for each of the resilience-items introduced earlier, comparing respondents who exhibited the highest level of resilience with all others. Because age interacts strongly with duration since arrival, each model controls for duration of residence, age at the time of interview, and their interaction, as well as key covariates (sex, employment status, marital status, number of household members, life satisfaction, social-network indicators, and perceived discrimination). To correct for potential biases, a within-cluster correlation by nationality is also included.[2]

Fig 1. Resilience by age class in Italy and Germany (weighted percentages)

Italy *Germany*



Source: Own elaboration on ITRAS 2024 and on IAM-BAMF_SOEP for Germany

3. Preliminary results and conclusions

The inverted "U" shape of resilience by age (Fig. 1) does not control for the effect of the duration of residence in the destination country, as well as many other individual characteristics that the literature indicates as relevant in studying resilience. Among all the other essential covariates, years since arrival plays a key role by interacting with age and exerting a significant effect on multiple dimensions of integration, including language proficiency, labour market participation, housing, and legal status, among others. The logit models estimated hereafter for both Italy and Germany try to disentangle the effects of time, net of the other essential characteristics.

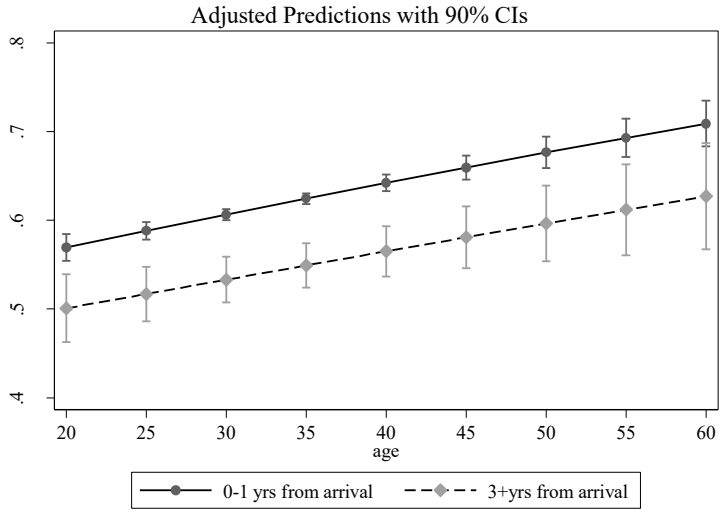
[2] Given that self-reported measures may be susceptible to cultural, linguistic, or social-desirability biases, especially in cross-cultural contexts, a preliminary test of differential item functioning (DIF) across groups was conducted. For each item, logistic regressions were run with the total BRCS score (as a proxy for latent resilience), group membership, and their interaction as predictors. The results indicate that the items functioned equivalently across groups, thereby supporting their cross-cultural validity: the items consistently measured resilience regardless of respondents' cultural background.

Model results reveal that, in Germany, high resilience is positively associated with age[3], regardless of the item analysed. Older refugees exhibit significantly higher levels than younger ones, suggesting an "age-related resilience effect," whereby resilience tends to increase with life experience and the development of coping strategies. As far as the duration of residence effect, the models consistently indicate that the number of years since arrival is significantly associated with lower resilience. Refugees who arrived more recently were more likely to report being highly resilient compared to those who have been in Germany longer. These results may reflect a combination of selection and adaptation effects. To control for this possibility, predicted probabilities of resilience were estimated for different ages and years since arrival. The analysis reveals that the increase in resilience with age remains significant across various durations of stay, even after controlling for social network characteristics, perceived discrimination, and life satisfaction. Indeed, newly arrived individuals (those who have been in the country for less than two years) exhibit higher resilience at all ages compared with those who have been in Germany for three years or more. The results shown in Figure 2 refer to resilience measured as handling difficulties, but the same pattern holds if we consider any of the other three survey items.

Likewise, in Italy younger refugees appear less resilient than older ones in terms of their capacity to adapt. This capacity is highest among recent arrivals and declines among those who have been resident for a longer period of time. These age-related findings remain statistically significant when stratified by duration of stay and adjusted for all other covariates.

Fig 2 – Predicted probabilities for different ages at different years since arrival in Germany

Item*: "I try to think of how I can change difficult situations"*



Note: 90% confidence intervals. The Joint Wald Chi-square Test for age, years since arrival, and their interaction, is significant (p<0.005).

[3] A model including the quadratic term for age was tested to account for a potential non-linear (inverted U-shaped) relationship with resilience. The results were consistent with those obtained in the original specification without the quadratic term, indicating that inclusion of the age-squared term did not affect the marginal effect shown in Figure 2. This suggests that the linear approximation of age in the main models adequately captures its relationship with resilience in this sample.

Overall, the resilience models for Italy and Germany suggest that, holding all other major determinants constant, a dual pattern emerges. On one hand, older refugees exhibit higher levels of resilience, aligning with an "age-related resilience" differential that likely reflects greater life experience and enhanced coping abilities. On the other hand, refugees who have spent a more extended period in the host country show lower levels of resilience, suggesting a potential "resilience deterioration" effect associated with prolonged exposure to stressors and with integration policies that unintentionally curtail agency and erode the personal resources they initially possess.

In summary, the findings suggest that resilience is stronger during the initial phase of settlement but may decline over time unless adequate protective factors are activated. Because the data are cross-sectional, causality cannot be established, nor can the long-term effects of refugee experience on resilience be assessed. Without longitudinal data tracking the same individuals over time, it remains unclear whether resilience increases with age or declines with longer stays in the destination country; however, differences between groups can be identified. These findings appear to be consistent with Siriwardhana (2021), who advocates a paradigm shift from vulnerability to resilience, thereby supporting the conclusion that policy interventions should prioritise the preservation and enhancement of refugees' resilience. The implications underscore the necessity of targeted policy measures aimed at facilitating refugees' effective integration into host societies. Such measures may include initiatives that enhance language proficiency, foster community participation, strengthen decision-making agency, enable family reunification, and cultivate a stronger sense of belonging within the host country.

4. Future Robustness Analyses

In order to enhance the robustness of the results and to disentangle cohort-specific influences from age or duration effects, the following robustness checks will be performed: (i) stratified analyses by year of arrival including proxy indicators for conditions at arrival; (ii) sensitivity analyses excluding or isolating earlier versus more recent arrival cohorts; and (iii) investigation of heterogeneity in the age- and duration-related effects across vulnerable sub-groups (e.g., by gender, educational attainment, country of origin).

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