

# NURTURING COEXISTENCE: ALGERIAN CHILDREN'S VISUAL NARRATIVES ON REFUGEE COMMUNITIES FROM EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVES

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## Abstract

This paper explores how Algerian children perceive and experience their co-existence with refugee populations within their communities, drawing on social and educational psychology frameworks. Motivated by a need for more child-centred insight into refugee-host dynamics, particularly in developing contexts, this study illuminates the voices of young individuals often excluded from policy and academic debate. Employing participatory, arts-based methodology, we engaged 60 children (ages 5–7, 8–10 & 11+) in drawing, collaging, and focus group discussions. These methods offered a multifaceted window into how different age groups conceptualize co-existence. Younger participants emphasised gestures of friendship, shared religious identity, and inclusive play as catalysts for harmonious relationships. Older children and adolescents showed heightened sociopolitical awareness, referencing Algeria's colonial history, conflicts with neighbouring countries, and broader global solidarity. Both positive attitudes, grounded in empathy and hospitality and, persistent challenges, shaped by prejudices and misinformation emerged, reflecting the complex interplay of moral, cultural, and developmental factors. Findings underscore that co-existence is perceived as both a moral obligation, often grounded in religious and cultural norms, and a practical opportunity for community enrichment. Yet significant barriers persist, including social exclusion and unaddressed anxieties about health and safety. By highlighting how children's perspectives evolve with age and context, this study underscores the potential of educational initiatives rooted in educational psychology to foster tolerance, empathy, and inclusive attitudes at an early stage. The research also demonstrates how arts-based, child-focused approaches can yield nuanced understandings of co-existence in settings hosting large refugee populations. These insights are vital for educators, policymakers, and psychologists seeking to promote community cohesion and to design interventions that resonate with children's lived experiences and developmental needs.

**Keywords:** *Coexistence, refugees, host communities, social psychology, arts-based methods.*

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## 1. Introduction and rationale

Algeria's colonial history and sociopolitical landscape have made it home to diverse refugee populations, including those from the Sub-Saharan, Western Sahara, Palestine and other Arab countries (Venturini & Fargues, 2015; Boukhari, 2022). While existing research has explored Algeria's refugee policies (Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, 2016; Van Soest, 2019), little attention has been given to how host-community children perceive and experience cohabitation with refugees. These interactions can be shaped by historical migration patterns, regional conflicts, and Algeria's evolving approach to displacement.

This research adopts a child-centred, arts-based approach to explore how young Algerians conceptualise coexistence through social and educational lenses. Doing this, this study offers a fresh lens on how young people interpret complex social realities, laying the groundwork for policies that recognize their active role in peacebuilding, social cohesion and ultimately, societal citizenship (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Farini, 2023). Understanding children's perspectives is essential for developing interventions that foster emotional wellbeing (Howard & McInnes, 2013), tolerance (Killen et al., 2011) and social cohesion, particularly in diverse and historically charged settings such as Algeria. This study examines how Algerian children through their early years to adolescence, perceive and experience co-existence with refugee communities in their everyday environments. It explores how children's conceptualisations evolve with age, as well as in the context of historical, cultural, and national discourses on attitudes toward displaced populations.

## 2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

The present study utilises Socio-Cultural Perspectives and Social-Cognitive Developmental Theory (SCDT) to capture the multifaceted processes through which children form and negotiate attitudes toward refugees. From an educational psychology standpoint, constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) asserts that children actively construct knowledge within socially mediated environments. Schools, family settings, and broader cultural contexts become crucial sites where intergroup attitudes are either reinforced or challenged. Vygotsky's emphasis on guided interaction and scaffolding sheds light on how play, peer collaboration, and cultural exposure can support or undermine inclusive values (Bernard, 2024). In this study, arts-based methodologies exemplify the socio-cultural principle that children learn and express evolving attitudes through creative, interactive mediums (Hickey-Moody et al., 2021).

Social-Cognitive Developmental Theory (SCDT), articulated by Frances Aboud (1988, 2008) and expanded by Rutland & Killen (2015), provides a developmental lens on how children's intergroup attitudes evolve in tandem with their cognitive capacities. Early in childhood, children rely on perceptual markers such as skin colour (Renno & Shutts, 2015; Barrett, 2007), dress and language (Kinzler et al., 2009; Heiphetz et al., 2013), to form basic in-group and out-group distinctions, leading to simplistic notions of fairness, kindness, or exclusion. As they mature, they integrate broader social, cultural, and historical narratives, gradually moving toward complex moral rationales grounded in religious or national identities. This developmental arc underscores the interplay between moral awareness and the child's capacity to handle more abstract social information.

## 3. Methodology and research design

This study employed an exploratory, qualitative design using a participatory, arts-based methodology (Leavy, 2020) to capture children's perspectives on refugee-host coexistence. The sample included 60 children (5–7,  $n=20$ ; 8–10,  $n=20$ ; 11+,  $n=20$ ) from schools in Eastern Algeria, where a growing Sub-Saharan refugee population shares public spaces. The region's proximity to Tunisia and the Mediterranean migration routes, make it a significant site for refugee movement (Fargues, 2009). While not necessarily representative of all Algerian host communities, the participating schools provided a real-world setting where children were likely to encounter displaced populations.

Age groups were structured according to school systems and accessibility gender balance was maintained, and ethical protocols followed: older children provided informed consent, while younger children gave assent alongside parental consent. Children were regularly reminded of their right to withdraw, even if they wished to engage in activities without being part of the study (Harcourt & Sargeant, 2012). The study also followed Swansea University Board of Ethics approval, ensuring confidentiality and child safeguarding. This research contributes to a larger project on children's perceptions of coexistence across different cultural contexts.

### 3.1. Data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations

Workshops, lasting up to two hours, involved drawing and collaging to visually capture perceptions of coexistence were followed by focus group discussions where children elaborated on their artwork. Discussions (30-45 minutes) were audio-recorded and guided by open-ended questions, with extensive field notes made documenting nonverbal cues, group dynamics, and informal remarks. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2023) was conducted after data transcription, alongside children's verbal artwork interpretations. Recurring themes emerged inductively, grounded in children's own words rather than imposed categories. Triangulation, comparing verbal insights associated with visual outputs, and field notes, provided a comprehensive understanding of how age and sociocultural influences shaped children's views on refugee integration (Heale and Forbes, 2013; Corwin & Clemens, 2020).

## 4. Findings

The analysis revealed a diverse range of perspectives on co-existence, spanning inclusive attitudes grounded in religious or moral teachings as well as instances of prejudice and social tension. The following thematic clusters reflect how children across the three age groups conceptualised refugee integration, highlighting a developmental trajectory that moves from direct, action-oriented approaches to more complex considerations of identity, religion, and socio-political contexts.

### 4.1. Playful compassion: Emerging moral foundations (ages 5–7)

Children in the youngest cohort often depicted straightforward acts of inclusion, such as inviting newcomers to play group games or join in everyday activities. Their artwork frequently highlighted shared

interactions, for instance, drawing football matches where “sad-looking” peers were encouraged to participate. Several children recalled teacher-led messages discouraging bullying, indicating that moral directives in the school setting had become part of their conceptual repertoire. Nonetheless, a few younger participants expressed unease about differences in physical appearance (e.g., skin colour or clothing), suggesting that emergent awareness of “otherness” could complicate these otherwise simple, prosocial notions.

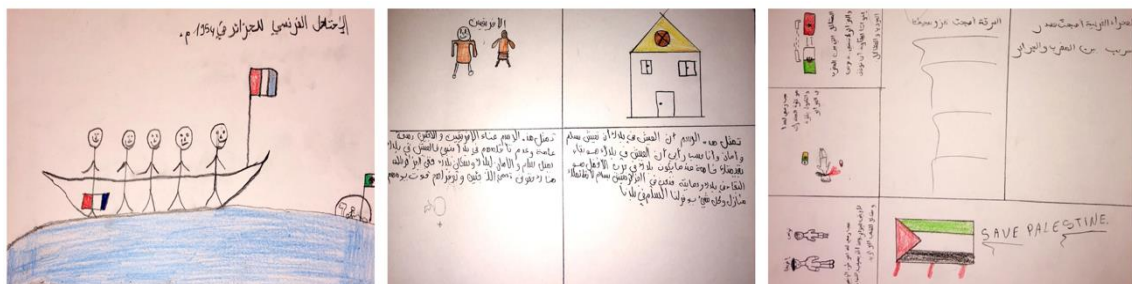
Figure 1. Children's perspectives on co-existence: Age group (5-7).



#### 4.2. Growing complexity: Evolving perspectives (ages 8-10)

Middle childhood emerged as a pivotal stage, where competing narratives, including empathy, national loyalty, and social anxieties, began to influence children's perceptions of refugees in more explicit ways. While some participants cited Algeria's colonial past as justification for solidarity, others argued that displaced individuals had a duty to remain and fight for their countries. Discussions of regional instability, particularly in relation to Tunisia, Morocco, and the Palestinian people's lifelong history with conflict, reinforced the perception that migration is rooted in broader political struggles rather than purely humanitarian concerns. At this stage, children also expressed a growing awareness of linguistic and behavioural differences, with some viewing them as barriers to integration while others identified them as features of a diverse community.

Figure 2. Children's perspectives on co-existence: Age group (8-10).



#### 4.3. Critical consciousness and aspirations of solidarity: Adolescent insights

Adolescents exhibited the most sophisticated perspectives, expanding their discussions beyond cultural and religious identity to include systemic inequalities affecting refugees. They frequently referenced structural barriers, such as the inaccessibility of education, transportation, and public services, as obstacles to meaningful co-existence. Many critiqued the disconnect between Islamic teachings on hospitality and their practical application in the Algerian society, highlighting contradictions between religious ideals and institutional realities. Additionally, this age group introduced new dimensions of co-existence, including ecological responsibility and disability inclusion, suggesting an evolving conceptualisation of solidarity that extended beyond human-to-human interactions. Despite a strong emphasis on aspirational unity, symbolised by phrases like *Khawa Khawa* ("brothers, brothers"), many acknowledged that real-world exclusions persisted, revealing a tension between idealised notions of belonging and the structural barriers that shape everyday experiences.

Figure 3. Children's perspectives on co-existence: Age group (11+).



## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Developmental progression and the moral tensions of co-existence

The data illustrate a developmental shift in how children perceive and articulate co-existence with refugees, echoing Social-Cognitive Developmental Theory (SCDT), which posits that attitudes toward social groups evolve in tandem with cognitive growth (Aboud, 2008; Rutland & Killen, 2015). Younger children predominantly relied on concrete actions, such as inviting refugees to join play, reflecting simpler moral schemas and a reliance on perceptual categorisation (e.g., “different colours,” “sad-looking”). Their frequent invocation of Islamic teachings on equality underscores the straightforward moral logic typically seen in early childhood, where any differences are noted but not deeply scrutinised. However, the concern that “differences might cause problems” foreshadows the emergent anxieties that can become more pronounced as children’s reasoning develops.

By contrast, older cohorts incorporate socio-political and historical contexts, suggesting that their capacity for abstract thinking expands as they age, a key proposition within SCDT. Their awareness of regional conflicts (e.g., tensions with Morocco or Tunisia) and historical memory (Algeria’s colonial legacies) indicates a growing ability to integrate cultural narratives into moral judgments. This evolution, which aligns with the theory’s emphasis on the interplay between individual cognition and societal cues, explains why some adolescents oscillate between xenophobic fears (valuing group loyalty and stability) and hospitality imperatives (grounded in religious duty or patriotic solidarity). Although these findings also resonate with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 1979), SCDT’s lens clarifies how cognitive maturity and exposure to social narratives shape whether such moral tensions lead toward empathy or exclusion.

### 5.2. Limitations and future directions

This study’s focus on schools in eastern Algeria limits the generalisability of its findings, given regional variations in refugee influx and cultural discourses. Ongoing geopolitical instabilities across North Africa may produce distinct attitudes in other communities, warranting comparative research. Longitudinal studies would further illuminate how intergroup attitudes shift from early childhood through adolescence, showing whether targeted interventions rooted in SCDT and constructivist approaches can alter long-term outcomes. Additionally, including refugee children’s perspectives would complete the coexistence narrative, revealing how host and refugee youth perceive one another’s needs and identities. Such expansions could deepen our grasp of how moral, cultural, and cognitive dimensions intersect within diverse educational and community settings.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, this study reveals how Algerian children at different developmental stages perceive and negotiate co-existence with refugee communities, demonstrating that younger children rely on concrete moral imperatives while older children integrate historical, political, and religious discourses into their views. Findings emphasise that moral tensions around hospitality, xenophobia, and national pride intensify as children absorb broader socio-political narratives. They also underscore the pivotal role of schools, which, although not currently hosting refugees, remain essential spaces for shaping inclusive attitudes. Without coordinated support from families, policymakers, and community organizations, entrenched prejudices cannot be dismantled effectively, making it critical to align public discourse, religious teachings, and tangible policy measures to transform ideals of solidarity into concrete, everyday practice. Future

research could broaden the geographic scope, adopt longitudinal designs, and incorporate refugee children's own voices, thereby refining our understanding of coexistence and promoting child-centred, participatory methods that foster empathy and meaningful inclusion in settings affected by ongoing migration.

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