Teachers College
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

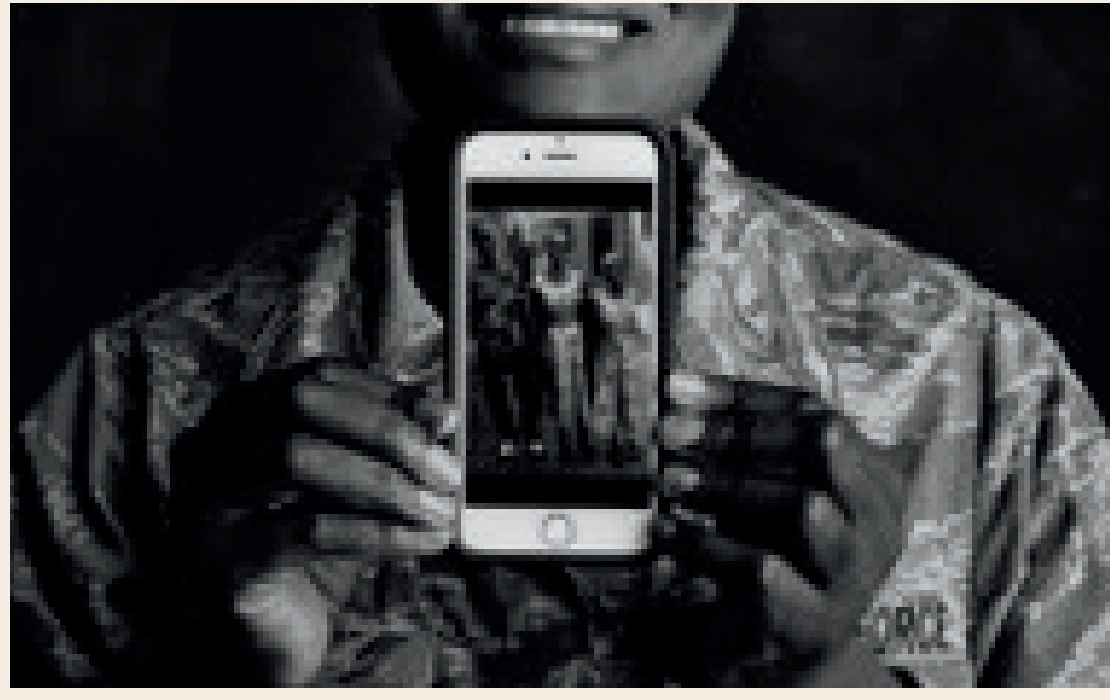# From Adversity to Achievement:
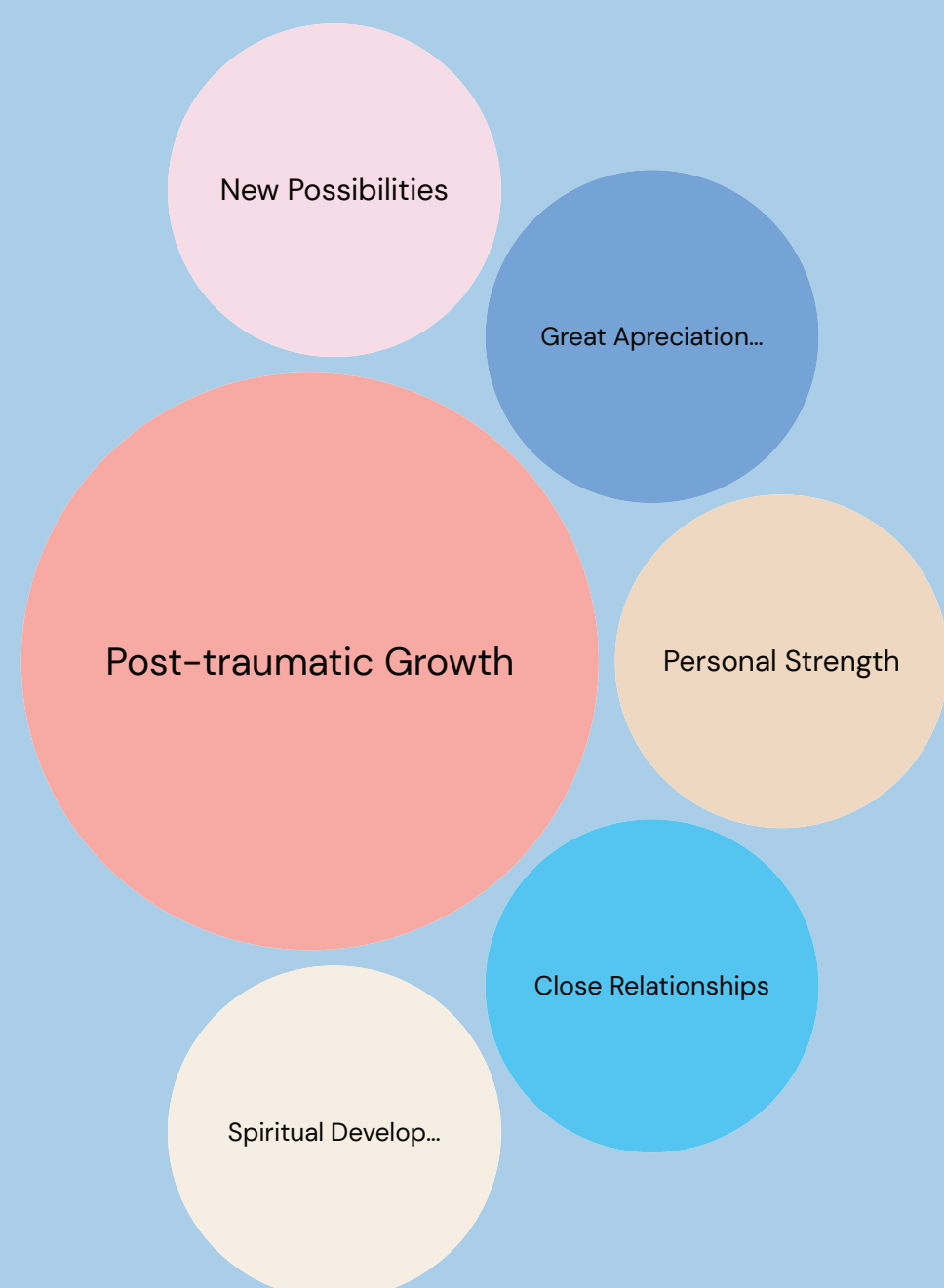## A Narrative Inquiry of Displaced Students

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01 Background Information

- In 2022, global forced displacement escalated to a record **108.4 million people**, surpassing figures from World War II (UNHCR, 2022).
- Forced displacement **disrupts the education of refugees.**
- Factors like the necessity to work, secure basics, and manage psychological trauma often **sideline** their **educational pursuits** (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).
- Higher education, however, can **empower** them **to overcome the various challenges they face** (Abamosa, 2023; O'Keeffe and Niyonkuru, 2021).
- UNHCR, Columbia University, and Oxford University, among others, have initiated **scholarship programs for forced displaced people.**
- Yet, financial constraints are just one hurdle; displacement also **impacts identity and entails significant trauma, including physical and emotional hardships and loss of networks** (Hack-Polay et al., 2021; Atmacasoy et al., 2023).
- There is a **lack of research** on the experiences of refugees in universities.
- **This study investigates how displaced students navigate these challenges in U.S. higher education settings**
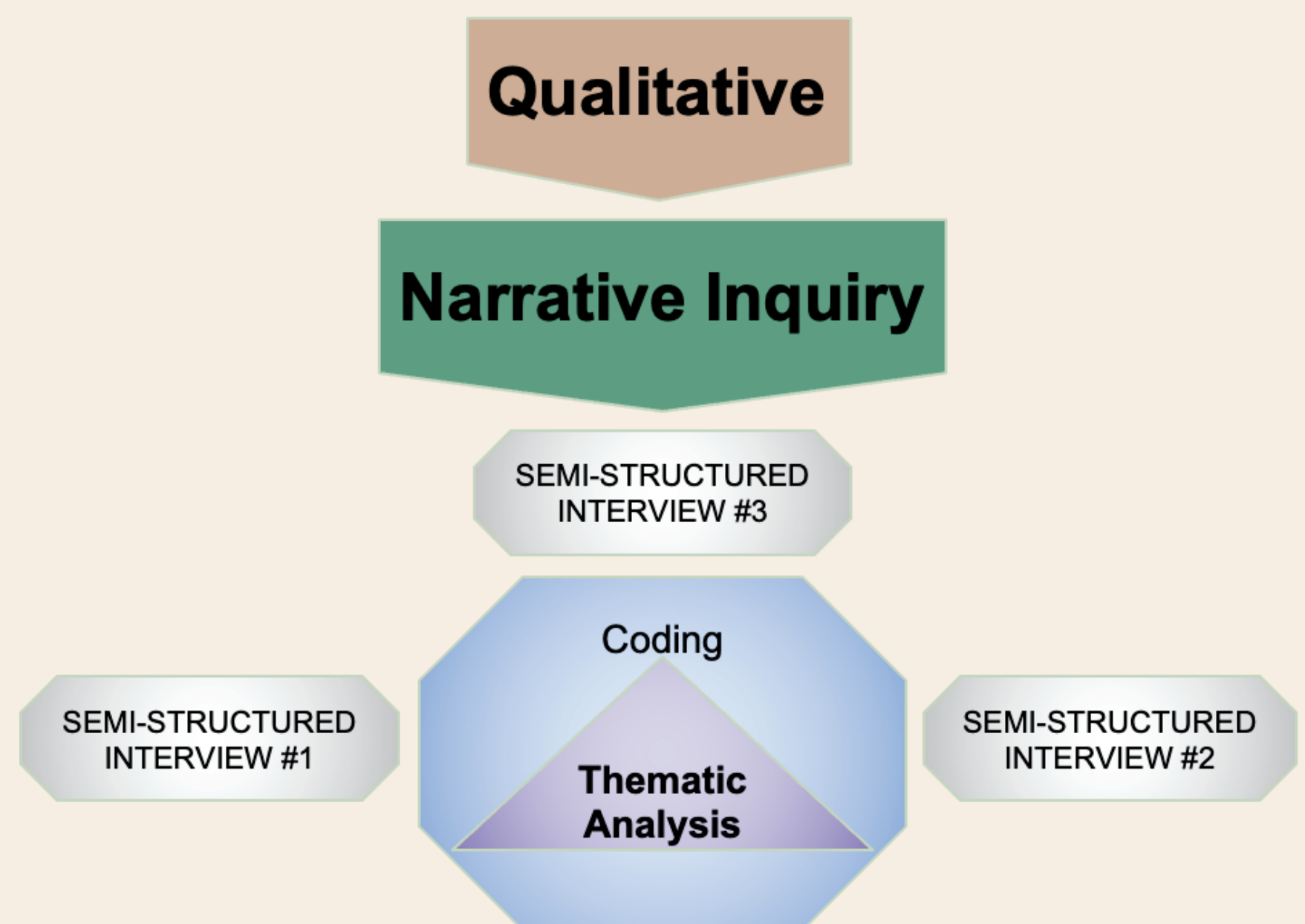
02 Research Question

- **How do displaced students navigate the academic, social, cultural, psychological, economic, and integration challenges during their transition to higher education institutions in the U.S.?**
- What are the experiences of displaced students as they transition into higher education in the U.S.?
- What multifaceted factors influence the journey of displaced students from adversity to achievement in U.S. higher education?
- What specific structural and psychosocial obstacles impact the educational experiences of displaced students in U.S. higher education institutions?

03 Theoretical Framework

Post Traumatic Growth Theory (PTG) is a theoretical framework that suggests that individuals who have experienced significant trauma or adversity can undergo positive psychological changes and personal growth as a result of their experiences. It proposes that trauma does not solely lead to negative outcomes, but can also serve as a catalyst for transformative growth in various areas of life.

New Possibilities
Great Apreciation...
Post-traumatic Growth
Personal Strength
Close Relationships
Spiritual Develop...

04 Research Methods

Qualitative

Narrative Inquiry

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #3

Coding

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #1

Thematic Analysis

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #2

05 Participants

Mike
I'm from Afghanistan... throughout my life I've had to move from countries... 20 years ago, me and my family, we had to leave Afghanistan to Iran and Pakistan due to the takeover of the country by the Taliban. The same thing happened after 20 years. After the withdrawal of the US Army Afghanistan's government was collapsed, and Kabul was surrendered by Taliban. Then I had to be displaced because of the persecution and threats that I was facing

Mary
I'm an Afghan woman... I'm a minority in Afghanistan. Um, I'm a student in Columbia University and soon I will be a graduate from Columbia University. Um, I, I am a student refugee and I believe I will be an, an an, an influential person in policies related to Afghanistan one day. Yes.

Jake
I am originally from South Sudan ... I fled my country, uh, when I was a child. I was 11. There was a conflict between the Sudanese government and the Sudan people's Liberation Army, the rebels... My village was attacked and we fled. We came to Kenya... luckily we were received by the UN and taken to the camp, to the, uh, Kakuma camp where I will stay for the next 20 years

06 Findings

Navigating New Horizons: Challenges, Resilience, and Integration:
Students faced **challenges** including academic rigor, cultural differences, and social isolation. Despite the obstacles, they showed **resilience** and utilized intrinsic and external resources to overcome them. Students who effectively navigated cultural and social **integration** tended to report higher satisfaction with their academic experiences and personal development.

Voices Beyond Language: Communication Struggles and Adaptation
Participants encountered **language barriers** in daily interactions and academic settings, requiring advanced l**iteracy and specialized terminology. Language support services and informal peer networks** were crucial in helping students overcome these challenges.

Coping Mechanisms Employed to Thrive in the Face of Adversity
Displaced students coped by seeking community support, engaging with cultural groups, and using university mental health resources. Institutional support was key, especially when schools offered tailored programs for their unique needs.

07 Conclusion

Mary, Mike, and Jake used their challenges to achieve personal and academic growth, demonstrating resilience in line with PTG's focus on personal strength, new possibilities, and enhanced relationships (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

- The three participants were able to adapt to the new academic environment by utilizing additional academic resources and seeking faculty guidance.
- The students face various challenges, including economic hardships, language barriers, cultural adaptation, and psychological trauma.
- Structural and psychosocial obstacles such as navigating complex university bureaucracies, financial aid, and legal frameworks around work and immigration status require institutional support to overcome.
- Cultural and spiritual resources were crucial for trauma processing and PTG, with social networks playing a vital role (Hirad et al., 2022; Rodgers, 2009).
- PTG's Western-centric approach necessitates culturally sensitive educational methods, particularly in collectivist cultures (Splevins et al., 2010).
- The study advocates for integrating cultural identities into education and suggests curriculum adjustments and better educator support to meet displaced students' needs effectively (Alefesha & Al-Jamal, 2019).

08 Theoretical Contributions

- This research extends Posttraumatic Growth Theory, traditionally used in clinical psychology, into the field of international education by demonstrating how educational settings can act as contexts for significant growth and resilience in displaced populations.
- It identifies specific elements such as supportive resources, community and peer networks, and culturally sensitive pedagogies that facilitate this growth, offering a practical framework for educational design and policy.