Research Article

e-ISSN: 3007-5297
2025: Vol2(1), pp 1-15. https://doi.org/10.38140/ijms-2025.vol2.1.05
Interdisciplinary Journal of Management Sciences

Through the Eyes of Students and Staff: The Psychosocial Drivers of Violence in Selected South African Universities

Bonginkosi H. Mutongoza[1]
Eleanor A. Hendricks[2]

AFFILIATIONS

[1]Faculty of Education, Walter Sisulu University, Komani, South Africa.
[2]Faculty of Education, North West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: bmutongoza@outlook.com*

EDITORIAL INFORMATION
Received: 20 October 2024
Revised: 16 February 2025
Accepted: 20 February 2025
Published: 02 March 2025

DOI: 10.38140/ijms-2025.vol2.1.05

Abstract: Globally, universities have traditionally been viewed as sanctuaries of peace, devoid of violence. However, the increase in campus-related violence in South Africa has dispelled this assumption. Recently, there has been a rise in the incidence of murders, violent protests, and self-directed violence at several universities in South Africa, raising alarm among stakeholders in university education. Against this background and underpinned by Sameroff's Transactional Model of Development, this study set out to explore the psychosocial drivers of violence at three South African universities from the perspectives of students and staff. To achieve this, the study employed a qualitative approach and a multiple case-study design, selecting participants through convenience sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured online interviews with students and lecturers at the three universities. The findings revealed a range of factors, including substance abuse, mental health issues, upbringing and background, and peer influences, as the principal psychosocial factors driving violence at the universities. The study, therefore, concluded that although violence is a complexly interwoven phenomenon, if universities are to reclaim their reputations as peaceful societies, there is an urgent need for all stakeholders in higher education to collaborate and address violence from diverse perspectives.

Keywords: Campus security, cultures of violence, higher education, mental health, socialisation, violence.

1. Introduction

The high levels of violence in South African universities reflect an education system in crisis, contradicting traditional global perceptions of universities as peaceful environments that enable the pursuit of knowledge (Hughes, 2019; Ajayi et al., 2021). Violence manifests in various forms, including gender-based violence (GBV), self-harm, assault, and vandalism, significantly affecting both the learning process and the safety of all stakeholders (Griner et al., 2020; Hamby, 2017; Mvumvu, 2020). The fear instilled in students and educators highlights concerns regarding campus security; despite ongoing efforts to address the issue, the success of these efforts remains debatable (Scott & Hargreaves, 2015; Mootz et al., 2019; Grobler, 2018; Jansen, 2018; Chothia, 2020).

Although violence has been reported in universities worldwide, South Africa faces a unique and severe problem that has not been thoroughly researched (Krebs et al., 2016; Burton & Guidry, 2021; Hannan et al., 2021). The violence at South African universities mirrors broader societal challenges, where communities are plagued by high levels of crime and violence (Kreigler & Shaw, 2016; Mabuza, 2021; Mncube et al., 2022). Willman et al. (2019) argue that the country's increasing homicide rates are indicative of a societal struggle to control violence in all its forms. In fact, South Africa is ranked among the top 10 most violent countries globally, with nearly two in five children experiencing violence before reaching university age (Artz et al., 2016; Bloom, 2019).

Despite these alarming statistics, widespread underreporting of violence suggests the problem is even more severe than it appears. Reasons for non-reporting include mistrust in the justice system,

with arrests in reported rape cases as low as half, and guilty verdicts secured in less than 10% of cases (Willman et al., 2019; Ntlama, 2020). This pervasive violence contributes to its normalisation, posing a danger in which violence becomes viewed as an acceptable method of communication, even within educational institutions (Hamby, 2016; Leoschut & Kafaar, 2017; Lunneblad & Johansson, 2019).

While universities have made attempts to improve safety through enhanced security measures, such as better lighting and monitoring of campus access, violence continues to be a persistent problem, indicating the inadequacy of these interventions (Davids & Waghid, 2016; Ajayi et al., 2021; Mutongoza, 2023a; Mootz et al., 2019). Calls for further improvements, including the use of advanced security technologies like fingerprint-regulated access, are ongoing (Hassan & Ageed, 2015; Singh & Ramutsheli, 2016; Gould et al., 2017; Grobler, 2018; Mutongoza, 2023b).

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to investigate the psychosocial drivers of violence in South African universities, aiming to contribute to efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate violence in higher education. Psychosocial drivers are defined as factors related to both the psychological dimension—internal emotions, feelings, and reactions—and the social dimension, including relationships, family, values, and culture. We further define violence in universities as any intentional act or behaviour, whether physical, emotional, psychological, or self-inflicted, that causes harm, fear, or damage to individuals, groups, or property within the university context.

2. **Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded in Sameroff's Transactional Model of Development (TMD), which offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the drivers of violence in South African universities. The TMD asserts that individuals, particularly children and youth, cannot be fully understood outside the contexts in which they develop (Sameroff, 1975; Sameroff, 1987; Burton, 2008). It highlights the dynamic interplay between nature and nurture, emphasising that developmental outcomes arise from the continuous interaction between individuals and their environments. This interaction shapes both the individual and the context in which they are situated (Sameroff, 1975).

Central to this theory is the idea that human development is influenced by the reciprocal relationship between individuals and their family, peers, and broader community (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). The TMD underscores that an individual's behaviour is a product of the cumulative effects of personality traits, family experiences, and available resources, all of which evolve over time due to ongoing interactions (Sameroff, 1975; Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000; Burton, 2008). In this context, the model is particularly relevant for exploring how violent familial and community influences shape behaviours in universities. The TMD thus provides a useful lens for examining how violence in educational institutions is sustained and reproduced.

The model's premise—that socialisation amplifies certain childhood traits while minimising others—positions the family as a primary socialising institution (Sameroff, 1987). Children raised in environments characterised by violence, neglect, or negative role modelling may come to see violent behaviours as legitimate methods for resolving conflict, asserting dominance, or expressing frustration (Burton, 2008; Baferani, 2015). Sameroff (1975) argues that individuals exposed to such environments are more likely to adopt these behaviours later in life, as their socialisation has normalised violence as an acceptable means of interaction.

The TMD enables an investigation into how the psychosocial drivers of violence in South African universities—such as family dynamics, community role models, and exposure to violent environments—contribute to violent behaviour. By understanding the contextual factors influencing students' development, the study reveals how these drivers manifest within the university setting and perpetuate violence. Thus, the TMD serves as a critical theoretical foundation for identifying and addressing the root psychosocial drivers of violence in South African higher education.

3. Methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm to explore the psychosocial drivers of violence in South African universities, seeking to understand the subjective experiences and perspectives of the participants. Following the advice of Creswell and Creswell (2018), the qualitative approach allowed the researchers to capture complex, socially constructed realities surrounding violence. A multiple case-study design was employed, enabling an in-depth examination of violence across different university contexts (Yin, 2012).

3.1 Case selection

The study purposefully selected three universities that represented a range of contexts in South Africa—urban, rural, and peri-urban institutions. This selection ensured that the diversity of violence-related experiences could be captured. The criteria for selection included geographic location, levels of reported violence, and the differing responses of the institutions to violence-related incidents. The goal was to provide both literal and theoretical replication by including institutions with varying degrees of violence and institutional interventions, thus enabling more comprehensive cross-case comparisons.

3.2 Participant invitation

Participants who had been involved in violence were recruited using convenience sampling. Invitation flyers were distributed via email and posted on student and faculty portals at three universities over a four-month period. Students and lecturers who had experienced or witnessed violence, or who had knowledge of the university's handling of violent incidents, were encouraged to participate. The invitation highlighted the study's focus and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality for all participants and institutions involved. This approach facilitated voluntary participation from individuals directly affected by, or aware of, the dynamics of violence in these institutions.

3.3 Justification of participant samples

The participant sample consisted of 32 students and 4 lecturers across three universities: University X had 20 students and 1 lecturer; University Z had 10 students and 2 lecturers; and University Y had 2 students and 1 lecturer. This sample was selected to represent a broad cross-section of individuals affected by or involved in violence-related issues at these institutions. The emphasis on students reflects their central role in university life and their vulnerability to violence. Lecturers were included to provide insights into the institutional response to violence and to highlight how staff members navigate these challenges. The smaller number of participants from University Y was due to lower response rates, but their inclusion remained essential for cross-institutional comparison. Although convenience sampling was used, the participant demographics covered a range of genders, academic levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds, providing rich qualitative data for analysis.

3.4 Data collection

Due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was conducted entirely online, using either Microsoft Teams or Zoom, depending on participant preferences. The semi-structured interviews encouraged participants to share their views freely, focusing on drivers of violence such as substance abuse, mental health challenges, and peer influences. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and anonymity and confidentiality were reiterated to build trust and ensure candid responses.

3.5 Data analysis

The data were analysed using the general phases of qualitative data analysis outlined by Leavy (2017):

- *Preparing and organising data:* Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and all identifying information was anonymised.
- *Initial Immersion:* The researchers read through the transcripts multiple times to familiarise themselves with the data.
- *Coding:* Codes were applied to sections of the data that related to key psychosocial drivers of violence.
- *Categorising and Theming:* Related codes were grouped into categories, from which themes emerged.
- *Interpretation:* The final step involved interpreting the themes in relation to the study's theoretical framework and the findings from other studies.

3.6 Limitations

We acknowledge that the use of convenience sampling may have introduced bias, as participants who volunteered may have had more extreme experiences of violence, potentially skewing the findings. In addition, due to the qualitative nature of the study and the relatively small sample size, the findings cannot be generalised to all South African universities. The online format of the interviews also limited participation to those with access to stable internet connections, possibly excluding other potential voices, particularly from underprivileged backgrounds. University Y had a notably smaller participant sample, which may affect the richness of cross-case comparisons between institutions. Despite these limitations, the study offers important contributions to understanding violence in South African universities and provides a foundation for further research on psychosocial drivers and interventions.

4. Presentation and Discussion of Results

To explore the psychosocial factors associated with the perpetration of violence in South African universities, participants were asked, "What psychosocial factors contribute to the violence experienced at your university?" The findings suggested that violence experienced in South African universities is shaped by a range of psychosocial factors, the most prominent of which were:

i. Substance abuse – a multiplier of violent behaviours,
ii. Mental health challenges,
iii. Upbringing and background, and
iv. Peer influences.

The following subsections will examine how these factors were identified as drivers of violence in universities.

4.1. Substance abuse – a multiplier of violent behaviour

The findings of the study revealed that, due to the multiple stresses and strains associated with university life, substance abuse was commonplace and resulted in several incidents of violence on campuses. Participants believed that the abuse of alcohol and drugs exacerbated underlying factors that provoked violence. This was aptly illustrated by a student who explained:

> *…my institution is like a tavern sometimes; it doesn't differ from a tavern because all over the premises, you find empty alcohol bottles in the residences, and outside, you find several empty alcohol bottles. In some residences, students even sell alcohol and drugs to each other. There are dealers on campus. It may sound ridiculous, but during the lockdown, police even raided some of these dealers because there were parties that were breaking curfew rules. The security personnel, I think, were involved because one can understand a bottle of beer or wine being smuggled in, but enough alcohol to have parties with hundreds of students attending is not smuggling alcohol; it is*

> *a well-coordinated business. If they can practice the rule of limiting alcohol that gets into the institution, I think it can be safe (Student 9, University X).*

The participants made it apparent that when intoxicated, students were usually unable to negotiate and resolve conflicts amicably; thus, conflicts were reported to oftentimes quickly resort to violence. A case in point can be drawn from another student who conceived:

> *Most of the time this happens when alcohol is involved, then conflict arises, and people are not able to resolve their issues then it leads to physical fights. In most of these places where violence happens, it usually involves substances some problems start when people argue. In other cases, alcohol is used as a source of confidence to confront someone when you are not happy with what they did to you. So, you can go and beat them up then blame it on alcohol. I have witnessed a lot of cases where someone wakes up the following day and says "Sorry, I was drunk it wasn't my intention", so yeah…alcohol is a huge factor (Student 3, University Z).*

A lecturer also substantiated these sentiments by postulating:

> *There are many causes of violence at my institution. I can think of alcohol abuse by students many times when a person is under the influence of alcohol, they may do some things they normally would not do… (Lecturer 1, University X).*

Another student linked the various forms of violence at the university directly to intoxication. The student revealed how substances continued to find their way onto the university premises despite being prohibited. The student reasoned:

> *When a person is slouched, they cannot really think clearly, it is the alcohol that usually influences their decisions. It is not just alcohol, illicit substances are also a major problem, they increase the viciousness of the violence a small dispute may end up blowing up because of the influence of substances. The sad thing is that sometimes the substances, although prohibited from the university premises, always get smuggled in. Students smuggle these things into the premises and then act in ways that are unusual to any normal human being. You look at rapes, they are usually linked to drunken behaviour, cases of fights too, no student will just pick a fight in their right mind. But add substances to the mix, and boom it becomes terrible. (Student 8, University Z).*

In explaining how substance use disorder caused violence in universities, a student weighed in and suggested a more drastic approach:

> *Alcohol is the major contributor. We are at university; I think they must ban the use of alcohol here just like in high school. If you come drunk, you would face a hearing and maybe expulsion if you come drunk or bring in alcohol. I think it must happen here too because we are also at school here. Alcohol is the major cause that is why men abuse women every weekend. (Student 19, University X).*

The findings revealed that substance abuse contributes significantly to the production of violence in South African universities by exacerbating the effects of other underlying factors. When tested against existing literature, this finding appeared to hold true, as reports on violence in universities worldwide demonstrate that the perpetration of violence is closely related to substance abuse (Perez-Pena, 2015; Basdeo, 2018; Hebernick et al., 2019). Sexual violence, sexual harassment, and physical fighting are known to be prevalent when substances are used; in fact, campus bars are recognised as the most popular sites for violence (Ngabaza et al., 2015; Mutongoza, 2023b). Consequently, female students typically express fear about attending venues for alcohol consumption without male company (Chekwa et al., 2013; Rospenda et al., 2013). As indicated by participants in this study, previous research has also shown that, in some instances, alcohol is often used as a pathway to sexual encounters at universities (Felix et al., 2015; Hebernick et al., 2019). In other words, it is reported that alcohol and drug abuse are used as a means of circumventing consensual sexual encounters, as perpetrators commit sexual assault (Perez-Pena, 2015). Non-consensual sexual encounters (rapes) are

typically most reported among heterosexual women and queer communities in universities (Walters et al., 2013; Felix et al., 2015). This aligns with the findings from the study presented above, as substance abuse was noted to enable the perpetration of violence at universities.

Considering the pervasiveness of substance abuse in South Africa, Sameroff's TMD offers a valuable theoretical lens. The prevalence of substance abuse and the violence often associated with it is a significant concern in South African communities (Carney et al., 2017; Rabotata et al., 2021). In fact, South Africa ranks very high in relation to heavy episodic drinking, which contributes to violence and femicide (Moleya, 2021; Rabotata et al., 2021). Consequently, the prevalence of substance abuse leading to violence in broader South African society may provide insight into the violence experienced at universities. This becomes clearer when considering Sameroff's proposition that the context in which an individual develops has a profound impact on their behaviour (Sameroff, 1987; Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000). Sameroff theorises that individuals' behaviour is shaped and adapted to the stressors within their environment; as such, those from violent and aggressive backgrounds are likely to exhibit violent tendencies (Jimerson et al., 2006). One can therefore assert that the widespread abuse of alcohol in South African communities and the resulting violence have become normalised, with universities merely reflecting the decay present in South African society.

4.2 Mental health challenges

The findings further revealed that mental health challenges influence the frequency and severity of violence experienced at universities in South Africa. Participants referred to factors such as stress, isolation, and anxiety as some of the factors inducing violence, particularly the self-directed form of violence. A student at University Y detailed:

> *In my circle of friends and acquaintances, I don't know anyone who does not engage in self-harm or self-destructive behaviours…this comes in the form of anorexia and bulimia. I have friends with eating disorders because of the way they have been perceived on campus and the way that society labels them. The majority are women and some are men. There are a lot of eating disorders among trans men. The way hormones work most of the time is that if you gain weight as a person who is assigned female at birth, a lot of it goes to your hips, your butt, and your boobs. Those are things associated with womanhood a lot. So, if you want to appear more manly, you want to have as little boob and as little butt as possible. So, people essentially try to starve themselves in order to rid themselves of those curves… I know lots of people who cut all the way down here (shows area from arm to elbow). Also, people who scratch themselves. I know people who binge-drink and take drugs or sleep around recklessly and carelessly. Self-destructive behaviours occur because we are faced with a society that constantly tells us that we should not exist you internalise that and end up, even when nobody is doing harm to you, you end up punishing yourself because you exist in a way that people say is wrong. (Student 1, University Y).*

Similar sentiments were also aired at University Z where students linked the self-directed violence that happened at the institution to mental health. The student opined:

> *I can also say that students and staff members are going through lots of stress and strains, especially during the pandemic. We are battling workloads and as a result, some are silently suffering from things like depression and anxiety. It is no wonder we have lots of suicides and self-harm at this institution. So, unless it is addressed, these psychological problems, together with a lack of a supportive community, often result in violence. (Student 7, University Z).*

This was corroborated by a lecturer at University Y who elucidated how the institution's failure to take the mental health of members of the university community seriously was a source of distress that could degenerate into self-harm. The lecturer explained:

> *…my feelings and perceptions are swept under the carpet because all the time, you are told, "You are privileged to be in this place", or "Just go on with it, work hard…" It is never about how I feel…*

> *The university does not have a safe place for me to express how I feel… The moment you bring in emotions, you are told to go to the Humanities faculty, but issues of violence and insecurity are intangible. These are issues that involve well-being in the workplace. In many cases it has become normalised – they tell you, "It is okay…", … I am sure you have heard of a former Dean at UCT who committed suicide about 3 years ago. To me, that is an example of how the issues of violence in the HEI system aren't really considered seriously. We are talking about a Dean at UCT. The information that is available, as far as I know, points to mental well-being because of the violence in university spaces. (Lecturer 1, University Y).*

Another student extended these sentiments by revealing how an intricately interwoven and complex interaction of poverty, pressure from the academic environment and background, and mental well-being was leading to violence at the university. The student explained:

> *We are having students who are depressed who are coming from poor families, so it is difficult to cope with a new environment and the unspoken demands to fit in because at the end of the day we all need that sense of belonging. Sometimes, the frustrations and pressures from one's home become a factor in how violence happens. From some of the backgrounds, things like seeking professional help, for example through the counselling unit. We come from societies that teach us, or maybe that used to teach us that men don't cry, and this makes it difficult for one to express emotions. Emotions and psychological challenges are seen as being for women, so to express them is generally seen as a sign of weakness. (Student 4, University X).*

Other participants also revealed that psychosocial factors also influenced internal conflict. This can be drawn from a student who expounded:

> *Students are going through a lot so it is easy to trigger their emotions and they cannot control their reactions. Maybe because of things that they are going through with their studies, social life and financially. So, students tend to be defensive because of the stresses and strains of their studies. (Student 13, University X).*

The findings revealed that mental health factors had a huge bearing on the production of violence in South African universities. The findings indicated that issues such as depression, stress, loneliness, and anxiety significantly influenced interpersonal and self-directed violence in universities. This is validated by the view that violence in higher education is triggered by the multifaceted pressures that confront university life (Owusu-Ansah et al., 2020; Mutongoza, 2023a). It is not uncommon for students to face mental distress, depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges as they try to navigate university life with limited resources (Lageborn et al., 2017; Mutongoza, 2023b). Oftentimes, university students already face the pressures of young adulthood, along with the additional pressure related to their studies, making them ready-made entrants for psychosocial challenges, especially where there are no support structures available (Mirsu-Paun, 2015; Tanji et al., 2018).

When psychosocial challenges meet inadequate support services to cope with the strains and pressures of life, it is not uncommon for one to resort to violent conduct (Graham et al., 2019; Makhubela, 2021). To this end, Agnew (1992) and Glassner (2020) signal that deviancy is often a response to the failure to cope with the presentation of negative stimuli in one's life. This is further cemented by Bandura (1974) and Zillman (1979), who warn that even in cases where alternatives are available that can be relied upon to circumvent the negative stimuli, the potential for aggression and other forms of delinquent behaviour is high. This consolidates the findings of the present study, which revealed that despite the existence of alternatives such as free counselling services (the effectiveness of which may, albeit, be questionable), there are still instances of violence that stem from these mental health issues. To reduce violence in universities, it is imperative to consider addressing the mental health-related factors associated with it.

4.3 Cultures of violence in upbringing and background

The findings also revealed that an individual's upbringing and background influenced the production of violence in their universities. Participants reasoned that one's background often influenced rogue traits such as toxic masculinity, intolerance, and the legitimation of violence as a dispute resolution strategy. A case in point can be drawn from a student who reasoned:

> *The causes of violence might be numerous things. The first one I can think of is how the person was raised because the background influences how people behave. Some people don't know what to do if someone hurts you, says something, or does something against you. Some people don't know how to react, so the next thing is to be violent. People have poor skills to resolve conflict, some people don't just have the skills to deal with conflicts…it is just how they believe, and what they have been taught is the only way to resolve conflict. Or they are not willing to listen to the other person…to listen to the other person's side. I think the biggest cause is a person's background, especially with our university. (Student 2, University X).*

Participants also revealed that both the home an individual comes from and the society in which they are raised become a standard by which one lives. This can be gleaned from the views of a student at University Y who opined:

> *I think a lot of the time, violence comes from ignorance. People who don't know any better, people who have been programmed by society to think that certain behaviours are okay, treating women badly is okay people are like, "Yeah I can do that!". That toxic masculinity thing of seeing women as sexual objects rather than people. People who genuinely don't know it is rape, and people who don't know how consent works. It has never been talked about. But there are also a lot of people who choose violence, I think a lot of that comes from upbringing. Having parents who are intolerant, is often passed down as having very strict conservative beliefs that vilify queer people or that insist on very rigid gender roles and that people who transgress these gender roles have violence enacted upon them. (Student 1, University Y).*

This was extended by another student who revealed:

> *How people are raised in their homes and how they are taught goes a long way in the way we see violence happening here. It influences how you view other people, even the ones you don't necessarily agree with on certain things. They say, "charity begins at home", so, the way you are raised defines how you will treat other people. (Student 1, University Z).*

Another participant also highlighted how an individual's background can influence the perpetration of interpersonal violence. The student explained:

> *…the backgrounds we come from can be influential in how an individual turns out in life. Someone who comes from a home where violence is okay will think that it is normal to respond to situations with violence. That is why we get people, for example, who believe that it is normal to be violent to a partner and to use violence against anyone who sees things differently. That is why you find students stabbing each other after an argument and things like that. (Student 5, University X).*

The findings from the study reveal that upbringing and background play a significant role in how violence occurs in South African universities. The findings indicate that when violence is normalised at home, or indeed at institutions of formative socialisation, an individual tends to view violence as a legitimate response to conflict and as a way of demonstrating domination over others. One needs to reflect on the view that the commonplace experiences of violence in South Africa often result in the legitimation of violence in educational institutions (Hamby, 2016; Leoschut & Kafaar, 2017; Lunneblad & Johansson, 2019). Mncube and Harber (2017) and Mutongoza (2023a) contend that high levels of inequality in South Africa, along with its relationship to violence and the history of apartheid, explain why the contexts in which these students grow up are violent. The South African communities that these university students come from are essentially replete with violence, which is under-reported and poorly handled by authorities when reported. In fact, violence reportage in

South Africa is around a meagre 50%, and only a paltry 10% of these cases secure convictions (Walliman et al., 2019).

Evidence suggests that South Africa is one of the most violent countries in the world (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020), and as much as 35.4% of children in South Africa experience violence before entering universities, of which 20% of this violence is perpetrated by caregivers or parents (Artz et al., 2016). It is therefore not surprising for institutions of higher learning in South Africa to exhibit similar trends of violence. Sameroff's TMD offers insight into why violence from communities finds its way into educational settings. Sameroff was of the considered view that both nature and nurture constantly evolve in their interaction, ultimately influencing an individual (Sameroff, 1975). In other words, the conduct of an individual is informed by the environment within which they develop and their personality traits (Sameroff, 1987). It is important to clarify that this does not squarely lay blame on communities as though universities do not have their own instances of violence in South Africa. Rather, the input of Sameroff's TMD is that behaviour, desired or otherwise, is the consequence of the interaction between an individual, their personality, social experiences, and resources (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). This means that an individual's perception of right and wrong is socially constructed, meaning one born into violence will, unless otherwise taught, construe violence as normal and appropriate (Jimmerson et al., 2006; Sameroff, 2009). It is not extraordinary that pervasive forms of violence, such as ghastly murders, looting, destruction of property, and other such forms, are similarly experienced in universities. Upbringing and background, therefore, play a central role in the production of violence in South African universities.

4.4 Peer influences

The findings of the study further revealed that the perpetration of violence is also influenced by the need to be affirmed and to fit into student and peer groups, failure of which may result in ostracisation and isolation. The participants disclosed that oftentimes, groupthink mentalities influenced the perpetration of collective forms of violence, as was the case presented by a student who argued:

> *Violence is caused by students' succumbing to peer pressure. The students usually influence each other into committing violent acts. I remember some years ago, students ganged up and slaughtered a cow from the nearby farms during a strike. Also, students when we strike, there is a lot of mob culture there, I was there when a building was burnt by students. It just starts with one person shouting the name of a building and before you know it, all of you are flocking there and destroying infrastructure. This happens a lot here ask anyone who is honest, they will tell you. (Student 10, University X).*

This was corroborated by another student at University Z who reasoned:

> *Sometimes, I think it is caused by peer pressure maybe you have an argument with someone, and you don't want to take it further (use violence), but when you get to your friends, they say to you "No! You must go and confront that particular person." And then you go and confront the person just because your friends said that you must confront that person and take this further (use violence). (Student 3, University Z).*

Peer pressure was also evident in the sentiments of another student who revealed that some baffling acts of violence were being perpetrated due to the pressure to fit in and identify as committed to the fight against perceived injustices by management. The student contended:

> *We also see looting by university students it has taken place many times, but in different forms. When students are striking, they tend to stop and loot from the trucks that are passing by the university to deliver goods to town. Some time ago, during a strike, students caught and slaughtered a cow that was passing by the university (Student 12, University X).*

Another student also revealed that involvement in violent protests was sometimes a result of the fear of not fitting in. The student stated that participation sometimes came in the form of coercion and threats from more senior students. The student narrated:

> *I have experienced looting during protests. Students forced their way into my residence, and they started demanding that we join the protests and fight for our allowances. We constantly see the problem of late access to funds NSFAS in particular. It seems the management always neglects the welfare of students. So, when you don't participate, you are regarded as a sell-out, and it becomes a huge problem. For a first-year student that makes you anxious and fearful. (Student 20, University X).*

The findings also revealed that engagement in violence is triggered by the pressure to fit in. It is worth clarifying that this pressure takes two distinct forms: being peer pressure and peer victimisation. According to Serban (2014), conformity is a condition in which an individual attempts to adjust to the situation within a social group because they feel there is a demand or pressure to exhibit the same behaviour as their peers. Studies show that students readily adopt conformist behaviour for various reasons, including a lack of experience in specific social contexts, feelings of inadequacy, and uncertainty about how to act in different situations (Serban, 2014; Mallinson & Hatemi, 2018). Instances of peer pressure were observed during incidents of infrastructure destruction, fights, and looting, while peer victimisation was reported in the forced compliance of students, particularly concerning participation in violent strikes. This is confirmed by Jansen (2017), Bawa (2016), and Badat (2016). These findings are consistent with the view that peer groups are critical in the socialisation of individuals, modelling behaviours that are perceived as acceptable or unacceptable. This explains the indistinguishable behaviours, values, and lifestyles that often manifest in educational institutions (Anastovski et al., 2015; Adegboyega et al., 2019). Unfortunately, as revealed in this study, peer groups are often environments where violence and delinquent behaviour are tolerated and sometimes promoted and encouraged (Ngidi & Molestane, 2018; Steyn & Singh, 2018; Mutongoza, 2023b).

Because peer involvement in the production of violence relates to the socialisation of individuals into behaviours that are normalised as standard conduct, Sameroff's TMD offers a theoretical perspective worth noting. Sameroff's TMD is based on the premise that delinquency cannot be studied outside the contexts in which it develops (Sameroff, 1987; Burton, 2008). Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) extend this argument by positing that the interaction between individuals and their social communities (family, peers, society, etc.) plays a prominent role in determining resulting behaviours. The pressure to fit in is thus a product of an environment that demands specific conduct for acceptance, which explains why violent students often associate with violent peers (Jimmerson et al., 2006; Baferani, 2015). Therefore, one can conclude that peer relations play a significant role in the production of violence in South African universities.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to interrogate the psychosocial drivers of violence in South African universities from the perspectives of students and staff. The findings revealed an array of factors, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, upbringing and background, and peer influences. Although one might expect universities to be at the forefront of fighting violence, it was baffling that participants argued that institutions were failing to address—and sometimes promoting—the psychosocial challenges confronting university students and staff. The disregard for mental health, upbringing, and background by institutions was also seen as a significant factor in stimulating the perpetration of violence. Participants further argued that present-day universities risk becoming hallmarks of inequality. While we concede that violence is a complexly interwoven phenomenon, we contend that if universities are to reclaim their reputations as peaceful institutions, there is an urgent need for all stakeholders in university education to collaborate and tackle violence from diverse

perspectives. We thus recommend that, if South African universities are to make significant strides in the reduction and ultimate eradication of violence, psychosocial wellness needs to be at the centre of all plans, as the results have demonstrated the centrality of psychosocial wellness in the perpetration of violence.

6. Declarations

Authors contributions: Conceptualisation (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); literature review (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); methodology (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); software (N/A); validation (E.A.H.); formal analysis (B.H.M.); investigation (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); data curation (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); drafting and preparation (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); review and editing (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); supervision (N/A); project administration (B.H.M.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

Funding: This research did not receive any external funding.

Acknowledgements: The authors are grateful to the participants, without whom this study would not have succeeded.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability: The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and ethical restrictions imposed by the Institutional Review Board. However, de-identified data can be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval by the ethics committee.

References

Adegboyega, L. O., Ayoola, V. A., & Muhammed, S. (2019). Influence of peer pressure on sexual behaviour of undergraduates in Kwara State. *Anatolian Journal of Education, 4*(1), 49–58. https://doi.org/10.29333/aje.2019.415a

Agnew, R. (1992). Foundations for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency. *Criminology, 30*, 47–87. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1992.tb01093.x

Ajayi, A. I., Mudefi, E., & Olawabi, E. O. (2021). Prevalence and correlates of sexual violence among adolescent girls and young women: Findings from a cross-sectional study in a South African university. *BMC Women's Health, 21*(1), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-021-01445-8

Anastovski, I., Velichkovska, L. A., & Ivanova, T. S. (2015). Relationship between peer pressure and violent behaviour at sport manifestations in the Republic of Macedonia. *Research in Physical Education, Sport and Health, 4*(2), 69-74.

Artz, L., Burton, P., Ward, C. L., Leoschut, L., Phyfer, J., Lloyd, S., . . . Le Mottee, C. (2016). *Sexual victimisation of children in South Africa. Final Report of the Optimus Foundation Study: South Africa.* UBS Optimus Foundation.

Badat, S. (2016). *Deciphering the meanings, and explaining the South African Higher Education student protests of 2015-16.* University of Witwatersrand.

Baferani, M. (2015). The role of the family in the socialisation of children. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 6*(S6), 417–423.

Bandura, A. (1974). Behavior theory and the models of man. *American Psychologist, 29*(12), 859–869.

Basdeo, V. (2018). Policing sexual violence in South Africa: Problems and challenges. *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences, 13*(1), 112–121.

Bawa, A. (2016). *UniversitiesSA condemns incidents of arson at public universities*. Universities South Africa.

Bloom, L. B. (2019, July 26). 20 Most Dangerous Countries for Women 2021. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurabegleybloom/2019/07/26/20-most-dangerous-places-for-women-travelers/?sh=3173db5ec2f4

Burton, C. W., & Guidry, J. D. (2021). Reporting intimate partner violence and sexual assault: A mixed methods study of concerns and considerations among college women of colour. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing, 32*(4), 370–381. https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659620941583

Burton, P. (2008). *Experiences of school violence in South Africa.* Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.

Carney, T., Myers, B., Kline, T., Johnson, K., & Wechsberg, W. (2017). Aggressive behaviour among drug-using women from Cape Town, South Africa: Ethnicity, heavy alcohol use, methamphetamine and intimate partner violence. *BMC Women's Health, 17*(1), 93. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-017-0447-2

Chekwa, C., Thomas Jr, E., & Jones, V. (2013). What are college students' perceptions about campus safety? *Contemporary Issues in Education Research, 6*(3), 325-332.

Chothia, A. (2020, March 5). UFH shuts its doors: Students told to vacate the premises and return home. Retrieved from The South African: https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/university-fort-hare-ufh-closed-students-told-to-leave/

Cicchetti, D., & Lynch, M. (1993). Towards an ecological/transactional model of community violence and child maltreatment: Consequences for children's development. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes, 56*(1), 96-118.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018*). Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.

Davids, N., & Waghid, Y. (2016). Responding to violence in post-apartheid schools: On school leadership as mutual engagement. *Education as Change, 20*(1), 28-42. https://doi.org/10.17159/1947-9417/2016/557

Felix, S., Hoyle, J., Posick, C., Miller, B., & Stogner, J. (2015). Deconstructing the LGBT-victimization association: The case of sexual assault and alcohol-related problems. *Journal of Family Strength, 1*(3), 1–30.

Glassner, S. D. (2020). Bullying victimisation and delinquent involvement: An application of general strain theory. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *116*, 105099. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105099

Gould, C., Mufamadi, D., Hsiao, C., & Amisi, M. (2017). *Reducing violence in South Africa: From policy to prevention*. Institute for Security Studies.

Graham, L., Mennicke, A., Rizo, C., Wood, L., & Mengo, C. (2019). Interpersonal violence prevention and response on college and university campuses: Opportunities for faculty leadership. *Journal of Family Violence, 34*, 189-198. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-018-9968-1

Griner, S. B., Vamos, C. A., Thompson, E. L., Logan, R., Vázquez-Otero, C., & Daley, E. M. (2020). The intersection of gender identity and violence: Victimization experienced by transgender college students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *35*(23-24), 5704-5725. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260517723743

Grobler, G. (2018). *Narratives of teachers' experiences of school violence and ethics of care [*Unpublished M.Ed. thesis] Stellenbosch University.

Hamby, S. (2016). Advancing survey science for intimate partner violence: The partner victimisation scale and other innovations. *Psychology of Violence, 6*, 352–359.

Hamby, S. (2017). On defining violence, and why it matters. *Psychology of Violence, 7*, 167–180.

Hannan, S. M., Zimnick, J., & Park, C. (2021). Consequences of sexual violence among college students: Investigating the role of PTSD symptoms, rumination, and institutional betrayal. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 30*(5), 586-604. https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2020.1796871

Hassan, A., & Ageed, M. (2015). Student violence in universities (manifestations, causes, effects, and solutions) in Zalingei University - Central Darfur State, Sudan. *ARPN Journal of Science and Technology, 5*(2), 80-86.

Hebernick, D., Fu, T. C., Dodge, B., & Fortenberry, D. (2019). The alcohol contexts of consent, wanted sex, sexual pleasure, and sexual assault: Results from a probability survey of undergraduate

students. *Journal of American College Health, 67*(2), 144–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2018.1462827

Hughes, C. (2020). Addressing violence in education: From policy to practice. *Prospects, 48*, 23–38.

Jansen, J. (2017). *As by fire: The end of the South African university*. Tafelberg.

Jimerson, S., Morrison, G., Pletcher, S., & Furlong, M. (2006). Youth engaged in antisocial and aggressive behaviours: Who are they? In S. R. Jimerson, & M. Furlong, *Handbook of school violence and school safety: From research to practice* (pp. 3–19). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Krebs, C., Lindquist, C., Berzofsky, M., Shook-Sa, B., Peterson, K., Planty, M., Langton, L., Stroop, J. (2016). *Campus climate survey validation study final technical report*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.

Kreigler, A., & Shaw, M. (2016). *A citizen's guide to crime trends in South Africa*. Jonathan Ball.

Lageborn, C., Ljung, R., Vaez, M., & Dahlin, M. (2017). Ongoing university studies and the risk of suicide: A register-based nationwide cohort of 5 million young and middle-aged individuals in Sweden, 1993-2011. *BMJ Open, 7,* e014264. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2016-014264

Leavy, P. (2017*). Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. The Guilford Press.

Leoschut, L., & Kafaar, Z. (2017). The frequency and predictors of poly-victimisation of South African children and the role of schools in its prevention. *Psychology, Health & Medicine, 22*(sup1), 81-93. https://doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2016.1273533

Lunneblad, J., & Johansson, T. (2019). Violence and gender thresholds: A study of the gender coding of violent behaviour in schools. *Gender and Education, 33*(1), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1583318

Mabuza, E. (2021, August 20). Nzimande expresses sadness at brutal murder of Fort Hare student. Retrieved September 1, 2021, from Times Live: https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2021-08-20-nzimande-expresses-sadness-at-brutal-murder-of-fort-hare-student/

Makhubela, M. (2021). Suicide and depression in university students: A possible epidemic. *South African Journal of Psychology, 51*(1), 3-5. https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246321992179

Mallinson, D. J., & Hatemi, P. K. (2018). The effects of information and social conformity on opinion change. *PLOS One, 13*(5), 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0230728

Meisels, S. J., & Shonkoff, J. P. (2000). Early childhood intervention: A continuing evolution. In S. J. Meisels, & J. P. Shonkoff, *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (pp. 3–31). Cambridge University Press.

Mirsu-Paun, A. (2015). Exploratory path models regarding the associations between suicide ideation, depression, interpersonal difficulties, and self-esteem among young adults. *European Psychiatry, 30*, 28–31.

Mncube, V., & Chinyama, N. (2020). Learners' perspectives on bullying in South African schools. *Journal of Human Ecology, 69*(1-3), 38-51.

Mncube, V., & Harber, C. (2017). *Violence in schools: South Africa in an international context.* Unisa.

Mncube, V., Mutongoza, B. H., & Olawale, B. E. (2022). Gender-based violence in adult education: The experiences of rural learners and adult educators. In Z. Groener, & S. Land, *Adult education and learning access: Hope in times of crisis in South Africa* (pp. 44–63). University of Western Cape.

Moleya, B. (2021, December 9). SA ranks high on list showing intimate partner violence fuelled by alcohol abuse. http://iol.co.za/pretoria-news/sa-ranks-high-on-list-showing-intimate-partner-violence-fuelled-by-alcohol-abuse-94b94366-3ed2-4b02-9f2f-cf6d1efab565

Mootz, J. J., Stark, L., Meyer, E., Asghar, K., Roa, A. H., Potts, A., ... & Bennouna, C. (2019). Examining intersections between violence against women and violence against children: perspectives of adolescents and adults in displaced Colombian communities. *Conflict and health*, *13*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-019-0200-6

Mutongoza, B. H. (2023a). The pervasiveness of student-on-student violence in South African universities. *International Journal of Education & Psychology in the Community, 13*(1/2), 70-91.

Mutongoza, B. H. (2023b). Student-on-staff violence at South African universities: A qualitative study. *Giornale Italiano di Psicologia e Medicina del Lavoro, 3*(2), 50-56.

Mvumvu, Z. (2020, May 19). More than 1,500 schools hit by vandalism, theft during lockdown. Retrieved June 17, 2020, from Sunday Times: https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-05-19-more-than-1500-schools-hit-by-vandalism-theft-during-lockdown/

Ngabaza, S., Bojarczuk, E., Masuku, M., & Roelfse, R. (2015). Empowering young people in advocacy for transformation: A photovoice exploration of safe and unsafe spaces on a university campus. *African Safety Promotion Journal, 3*(1), 30-48. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC178543

Ngidi, N., & Moletsane, R. (2018). Bullying in school toilets: Experiences of secondary school learners in a South African township. *South African Journal of Education, 38*(1), S1-S8.

Ntlama, N. (2020). Gender-based violence ignites the re-emergence of public opinion on the exercise of judicial authority. *De Jure Law Journal, 53*, 286–306. https://doi.org/10.17159/2225-7160/2020/v53a19

Owusu-Ansah, F., Addae, A., Peasah, B., Asante, K., & Osafo, J. (2020). Suicide among university students: prevalence, risks and protective factors. *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine, 8*(1), 220-233. https://doi.org/10.1080/21642850.2020.1766978

Perez-Pena, R. (2015, September 21). 1 in 4 Women experience sex assault on campus. *New York Times.*

Rabotata, N. E., Makhubele, J. C., & Mafa, P. (2021). Accessibility of alcohol as a risk factor contributing towards alcohol abuse amongst the youths of a selected rural community in Limpopo Province, South Africa. *Technium Social Sciences Journal, 25*, 715-721.

Rospenda, K., Richman, J., Wolff, J., & Burke, L. (2013). Bullying victimisation among college students: Negative consequences for alcohol use. *Journal of Addictive Diseases, 32,* 325–342. https://doi.org/10.1080/10550887.2013.849971

Sameroff, A. (1975). Transactional models in early social relations. *Human Development, 18*(1/2), 65–79.

Sameroff, A. (1987). The social context of development. In N. Eisenberg, *Contemporary topics in developmental psychology* (pp. 273–291). Wiley.

Sameroff, A. (2009). The transactional model. In A. Sameroff, *The transactional model of development: How children and contexts shape each other* (pp. 3–21). American Psychological Association.

Scott, D., & Hargreaves, E. (2015). Violence in Schools: The Role of Authoritarian Learning. In C. Harber, *The Sage Handbook of Learning* (pp. 243–253). Sage Publications.

Serban, G. (2014). *The mask of normalcy: Social conformity and its ambiguities.* Transaction Publishers.

Singh, D., & Ramutsheli, M. (2016). Student data protection in a South African ODL university context: risks, challenges and lessons from comparative jurisdictions. *Distance Education, 37*(2), 164-179.

Steyn, G. M., & Singh, G. D. (2018). Managing bullying in South African secondary schools: A case study. *International Journal of Educational Management, 32*(6), 1029-1040.

Tanji, F., Tomata, Y., Zhang, S., Otsuka, T., & Tsuji, I. (2018). Psychological distress and completed suicide in Japan: A comparison of the impact of moderate and severe psychological distress. *Preventive Medicine, 116*, 99–103. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2018.09.007

Walters, M., Chen, J., & Breidin, M. (2013). *National intimate partner and sexual violence survey (NISVS): 2010 findings on victimisation by sexual orientation. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Willman, A., Puerto Gomez, M., Gould, C., & Newham, G. (2019). *Crime, Violence and Exclusion in South African Society: Background Note for the South Africa Systemic Country Diagnostic.* World Bank Group.

Yin, R. K. (2012). Case study methods. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, L. D. L, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher, *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 141–155). American Psychological Association.

Zillman, D. (1979). *Hostility and aggression*. Lawrence Erlbaum.