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Resilience Level Among Sudanese University Students Exposed to Violence

مستوى المرونة لدى طلاب الجامعات السودانية المتعرضين للعنف

شهلة محمد الحسن الطيب*

كلية علوم الجريمة، جامعة نايف العربية للعلوم الأمنية، المملكة العربية السعودية



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Shahla M. Eltayeb *

College of Criminology, Naif Arab University for Security Sciences, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the levels of resilience among Sudanese university students exposed to violence. The study employed a mixed design method. The quantitative study used the resilience scale RS-14 and focused group discussion to deepen the understanding of resilience trajectories. The study sample consisted of (209) students. The RS-14 scale showed strong reliability and validity. Exposure to violence was high, as (47%) reported being exposed to at least one episode that lasted for several hours. While resilience level was high among 78% of the sample. No statistically significant correlation was identified between the total score of resilience and violence exposure. However, shorter violence exposure durations were associated with elevated resilience levels.

In conclusion, university mental health services and youth programs require the integration of the positive resilience trajectory in services directed to the youth most exposed to violence.

المستخلص

هدفت الدراسة إلى تحديد مستويات المرونة لدى الطلاب الجامعيين المتعرضين للعنف في السودان. واستخدمت الدراسة منهجية تصميم مختلطة؛ إذ استخدمت الدراسة الكمية مقياس المرونة RS-14، كما استخدمت المناقشة المركزة لتعميق فهم مسارات المرونة. وتكونت عينة الدراسة من (209) من الطلاب. وأظهر مقياس RS-14 صدقاً وثباتاً قويين. وكان التعرض للعنف مرتفعاً؛ حيث أفاد (47%) من أفراد العينة تعرضهم لحادثة عنف استمرت لعدة ساعات. وفي المقابل كان مستوى المرونة مرتفعاً بين 78% من أفراد عينة الدراسة. ولم يتم تحديد أي ارتباط ذي دلالة إحصائية بين التعرض للعنف ومستويات المرونة. ومع ذلك، ارتبطت مدة التعرض للعنف الأقصر بارتفاع مستويات المرونة. وختاماً، تحتاج خدمات تعزيز الصحة النفسية في الجامعات وبرامج الشباب إلى دمج المسار الإيجابي للمرونة في الخدمات الموجهة إلى الشباب الأكثر تعرضاً للعنف.

Keywords: Security Studies, Violence, Resilience, University Student.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدراسات الأمنية، العنف، المرونة، طالب جامعي.



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* Corresponding Author: Shahla M. Eltayeb

Email: seltayeb@nauss.edu.sa

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1. Introduction

University students constitute the backbone of societies, in particular in low resource settings where higher education is considered a pathway to success, breaking the cycle of violence and securing financial stability, which reduces the reasons for conflict (Hamid, 2021). Low-resource settings (LRSs) accommodate a large proportion of the world's young population and bear a disproportionate burden of the world's violent conflicts. The World Health Organization defined violence as "The intentional use of force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation" (Krug, 2002). Sudanese young adults and university students are at risk of various types of violence, including university related political violence, war and conflict.

Previous studies have indicated an association between violence, and psychological disorders, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Kohrt, 2012). This association is a consequence of the existence of several barriers in LRSs, including poor economic, political, and health services, as well as limited access to basic needs (Galagali, 2020). This is a consequence of the multi-label factors contributing to violence, and the high risk of exposure to atrocities and violent experiences in Sudan, comprising of gender-based violence (Jok, 2006), war and conflict (Sørbo, 2010). The current study postulates that this atmosphere of conflict, violence, and trauma may constitute a serious threat to university students' resilience levels.

Several studies (Southwick, 2014 and Tol, 2011) have focused on the negative effects of violence and adversity on mental health, including depression and stress-related disorders. This polarized analysis on the consequences of violence has led to insufficient con-

sideration of the influences related to resilient mental health outcomes.

An individual's reaction to trauma varies and further increases its complexities; nevertheless, focusing only on the negative outputs of violence exposure has been contemplated in the literature. Violence and trauma may disrupt the normal functionality of resilience, however, collective activities focused on adaptation, coping, and the dynamic interconnections between several factors, contribute to strengthening resilience, including supportive organizations, cohesive family structure, and resilient individuals (Pfefferbaum & Klomp, 2013). The current study aims to identify the resilience level among Sudanese university students exposed to violence and further identify factors contributing to resilience levels.

The study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of resilience among university students exposed to violence in Sudan?
2. Is there a correlation between duration of violence and resilience level?
3. Is there gender difference in resilience level among university students exposed to violence in Sudan?

1.1 Theoretical perspective on Violence and Resilience

Resilience theories claim that it is not the magnitude of a traumatic event or violence that constitutes risk, but rather, how individuals cope with it. When we face adversity, violence, or frustration, resilience helps us bounce back. According to Papadopoulos (2007), an individuals' response to trauma begins with normal suffering and advances into resilience responses. This understanding of individual reactions to traumatic events is critical, not only in identification and diagnosis, but also in relation to mental health services, by incorporating resilience as a positive lens within their clinical therapeutic interventions; that would enable



service providers and policy makers to respond to social trauma with a wider scope (Eltayeb, 2021).

Resilience is “A positive trajectory of coping after distress, traumatic exposure, or adversity, which constitutes the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning or competence, despite high-risk status, chronic stress, or following prolonged or severe trauma” (Woods-Jaeger, 2020, p.7). Factors related to resilience include a combination of micro genetic and mental factors and macro community, as well as sociopolitical factors that interrelate to regulate the reaction to violence and trauma. Hence, it is imperative to postulate that resilience can be understood as an individual trait, a process, or an outcome (Denckla, 2020). On the other hand, community resilience represents a “A community’s capacity to bounce forward following an adverse event such as mass violence or crisis” (Houston, 2015, p. 5). The ability of individuals and communities to bounce back indicates the ability to return to pre-crisis levels.

Resilience can further be understood as a continuum that may exist in different degrees across a lifespan. A person who is resilient in the face of work-related stress, or an academic setting, may face difficulties in coping with violent personal relationships (Tonkin, 2018). Therefore, resilience may change through the life span in reaction to external demands and one’s exposure to violence. Moreover, other factors may affect the degree of resilience, such as family support, cultural values, belief and religion. Each of these contexts could have different strengths and contribute differently to advance the individual resilience level (Riley, 2005).

2. Method

The study used a cross-sectional mixed design method and targeted youth groups in Khartoum state. A total of 209 people were invited to participate in the study, youth aged 18 to 30 years from two universities

(Ahfad university for women and El-Nileen University) and students who reported being exposed to incidents of violence (single question survey). Student lists were obtained, and a random cohort was selected, to whom questionnaires were administered. The quantitative study used the Resilience Scale-14 (RS-14), which is a well-known tool used to measure resilience. The RS-14 was validated among Sudanese university students by Badri et.al., (2017). Furthermore, questionnaires explored the participant demographics, exposure to violent experiences, and duration of exposure. A total of 209 valid questionnaires were used in the analysis. Statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS Statistic 24.0. Frequency and percentage were applied to describe variables. T- test tests were used, and Spearman’s Correlation tests were calculated to measure the differences and association between resilience levels, stratified by the independent variables (gender, and duration of violence). p-values less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

The qualitative part of the study used focus group discussion from the same participants to understand the pathways to resilience. Focus group discussion was conducted with 10 participants (aged 18 to 30). Focus group transcripts were coded and analyzed using an inductive approach. Participants highlighted key indicators of resilience including family, peers, and cultural contexts that impact how resilience is produced and manifested, as well as the relationship between violence and resilience.

3. Results

The study scale RS-14 indicated a strong internal item-total correlation that ranged between (.582-.752, $p > 0.001$). The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient was 0.89.

The demographic profile of the study sample showed that (n=110) 53% were males in comparison to (n= 99) 47% females. 65% were undergraduate students



Table 1 - Demographic Characteristics of Sudanese University Students

Gender	N	%
Male	110	52.6
Female	99	47.4
Total	209	100%
Violence exposure	N	%
Hours	100	47.8
Day to less than a week	66	31.6
One week to less than a month	22	10.6
One month and more	21	10
Total	209	100%

and 5% postgraduate students. All participants indicated being exposed to a form of violence. Duration of violence exposure varied from hours (n=100) 47.8% to less than a week (n=66) 31.6% (see Table 1).

During the focus group discussion, participants indicated being exposed to various types of violence, including family violence. (N. H) an 18-year-old female said: "I see myself as a survivor, my older brothers are so cruel and harsh with me verbally, and on occasions physically". Sexual harassment was also reported by female participants, they indicated they have been exposed to sexual harassment, especially on public transportation. The wide spectrum of the types of violence is not the core aim of this study, as we postulate that regardless of the type of violence, resilience factors will be present in different degrees, to buffer or regulate the effects of violence.

Resilience showed high levels among (n=164) 78% of participants (see Table 2). When participants were asked about the meaning of being resilient, various responses were recorded, including the feeling of strength, the ability to move on and being able to help

Table 2 - Resilience Levels among Sudanese University Students exposed to violence

Item	N	%
Low levels	2	1.0
Medium Levels	43	20.6
High Levels	164	78.4
Mean	80.5113	
95% Confidence Interval for	Lower Bound	78.7134
Mean	Upper Bound	82.3093

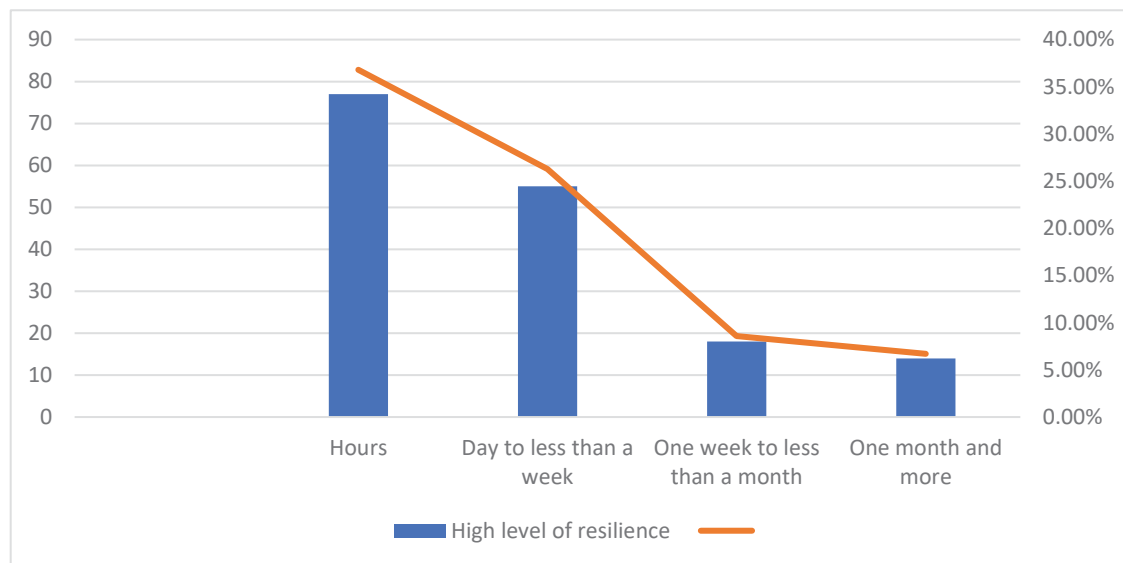
others. All qualities were positive. Participants indicated further qualities such as faith and religiosity as strong factors for being resilient, "As a Muslim, I have to have good faith and strong belief that it is God who will protect me, and the hardships we face are tests of my faith" (O. M, 24-year-old male). Furthermore, the family and Sudanese cultural factors were indicated, (I. S, 22-year-old female) said "A strong family upbringing, in addition to a rich culture of proverbs and stories are enriching one's level of resilience, for example: what does not kill you makes you stronger, this is how I remind myself to stay strong and resilient".

The Correlation Coefficient test indicated no significant association was identified between the degree of resilience and the duration of violence (Table 3). However, (36%) of the sample indicated having high resilience levels during the first hours of violence exposure, compared to only (10%) whose resilience continued at a high level after a month of exposure to violence (Graph 1). During focus group discussion, participants indicated that violence may encourage the emergence of resilience traits. (A. M, 19-year-old male) said "When the war hit my area I had to flee and seek refuge with my relatives in Khartoum. At first, I thought of myself as being weak and not having a strong character, but after this experience I was able to cope well, even in my study and duties towards my family, now I see myself as more resilient". Another young female (22-year-old) said "I see resilience as a wave that goes up and down, initially, you feel crushed,



Table 3 - Correlation Coefficient between Duration of Violence Exposure and Resilience level

		Duration of violence	Resilience
Spearman's rho	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	-0,089
	Duration of violence		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0,202
	N	209	209
	Correlation Coefficient	-0,089	1,000
	Resilience		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,202	
	N	209	209

**Graph 1** - Resilience level in relation to Duration of violence

but then hope, support from friends, and God give you strength and your resilience bounces back”.

Furthermore, the t-test indicated no gender differences were identified in resilience level ($M=4.43$, $SD=1.84$) $t(201)=2.402$, $p=0.682$ (see Table 4). When participants in the focus group were asked if they think men or women are more resilient, answers varied, “It depends on the situation, I think women are more resilient within their family and local community as they are more patient and able to adjust” (NH 22 male participant). Another indicated that “Men are exposed to more violence and violation that’s why I think they have developed stronger resilience” (MM 24 female participant).

4. Discussion

The study results indicated a high level of violence exposure among participants from two Sudanese universities. This is in line with the overall context of violence in Sudan. Previous studies reported an increase in domestic violence incidents, as (41.6%) of adults experienced violent episodes related to male controlling behavior, threatening behavior, and physical domestic violence (Ahmed, 2005). Irrespective of the violence type or duration, what seems to affect coping and resilience is an individual’s personal experience that gives meaning to incidents, thus violent incidents perceived as life threatening or humiliating may cause severe psychological effects, such as post-



Table 4 - Gender Difference in Resilience Level among Sudanese University Students

F	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means							
	Sig.	t	Df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p			Lower	Upper		
Resilience level	Equal variances assumed	0,168	0,682	2,402	201	0,009	0,017	4,43149	1,84530	0,79286	8,07011
	Equal variances not assumed			2,399	199,601	0,009	0,017	4,43149	1,84686	0,78963	8,07335

traumatic disorder and depression, which are emotional consequences of such encounters (Farrell, 2017).

The current study participants showed high levels of resilience, this is in line with previous literature indicating that young adults usually report high levels of resilience despite the degree of violence or trauma (Erdogan, 2015 and Hamdan, 2014). This high level of resilience could also be attributed to the nature of university study, is a stressor requiring psychological resilience to achieve academic success. Added to this stress is the exposure to violence, hence it is expected that resilience levels were high.

Furthermore, the results did not find significant gender difference in the degree of resilience, nevertheless women showed higher rates than men did. Previous studies among UK students indicated that resilience was more facilitative of female university students (Allan, 2014), as women may use more family support and emotional intelligence to strengthen individual resilience. One can assume that female participants have utilized Sudanese cultural heritage and family support to build their self-esteem as young, educated females, and hence are expected to be more resilient when countering incidents of violence.

Aligned with past work on resilience, the study results postulate two possible trajectories for resil-

ience after violence exposure. The first is the protective trajectory, in which resilience is part of a reaction to threat and trauma, to mitigate the negative effects of violence. This usually happens immediately after exposure to violence. The second is the recovery trajectory, characterized by the initial negative effects of the adverse event, followed by a return to competent functioning gradually over time (Gucciardi, 2018).

Resilience in relation to violence exposure constitutes a change in paradigm, reflected in shifting the focus from solely negative consequences of violence and trauma, to simultaneously evaluate the positive individual qualities related to resilience (Southwick, 2014). Strengthening resilience among university students will enable the deficit-based model of mental health to include strength and competence-based models that focus on resilience and adversity acquired developments, while addressing clinical manifestations of violence exposure.

5. Conclusion

One can conclude that the term resilience emerges as a compilation that establishes an interaction between individual traits, external overwhelming demands, belief system, and social support. This may contribute to the manifestation of resilience and sus-



tainability. Nowadays, violence exposure, crime and overall insecurity have become a reality of life and it is important to recognize that resilience mobilizes human capital resources in ways that create a pattern of coping with exposure to violence.

The study recommends that mental health workers and university-based counseling services understand resilience in relation to violence exposure, allowing the integration of salient concepts of resilience into relevant mental health services and student support. Universities should also consider students' exposure to violence and conduct a medical examination upon admission, to avail the required support that will build resilience.

The strength of this mixed design study is in its identification of the different levels of resilience among university students after exposure to violence. The generalization of the results remains limited due to the cross-sectional design. Further studies could follow the same cohort over time and add additional variables related to mental health.

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