

Original Article

# Student-on-staff violence at South African universities: A qualitative study

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Although universities have traditionally been regarded as ivory towers that are safe spaces for learning and personal development, recent trends in South Africa have revealed that universities are increasingly becoming recognized as sites for violence, including student-on-staff violence. Against this background, this study sought to explore narratives of student-on-staff violence and determine the extent to which these incidents happened.

**Methods:** Using a qualitative approach, the study employed a phenomenological research design. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, and data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 32 students and four staff at three public universities. Data was analyzed thematically.

**Results:** The findings revealed that student-on-staff violence often took the form of protest-related violence, verbal abuse, and physical assault of staff members. The study found that these acts of violence essentially responded to perceived systemic abuses and authoritarian governance within selected South African higher education. While some reported instances of violence were retaliatory, there are also cases of unprovoked violence by students on staff, including incidents such as drunken assaults on campus security personnel and disruptions of lectures on online platforms.

**Discussion:** The consequences of student-on-staff violence were found to extend beyond immediate harm and damage, including feelings of insecurity and anxiety among lecturers and support personnel, ultimately impeding university teaching and learning experiences. Such violence undermined the fundamental principles of academic institutions and created a hostile and unsafe environment for stakeholders.

**Key words:** higher education; inclusive education; transformation; verbal abuse; violence

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## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of a student-on-staff configuration of violence in universities has become a concerning phenomenon in recent years. Traditionally, universities have been viewed as ivory towers

– safe spaces for learning, personal growth, and intellectual exploration [1,2]. However, the shifting dynamics within higher education institutions have given rise to incidents where students engage in violent behavior explicitly targeted at the staff members responsible for maintaining the educational environment [3,4]. This violence baffles stakeholders, as it presents a direct onslaught on the education system, with immediate threats to those mandated to promote security within the educational environment [5,6]. Universities rely on their staff members, including professors, administrators, and support personnel, to foster an atmosphere conducive to learning and personal development [7-9]. These individuals are critical in delivering high-quality education, supporting students' well-being, and promoting campus safety. As such, when students turn to violence against staff members, it represents a direct assault on the education system itself because it undermines the fundamental principles of respect, collaboration, and the pursuit of knowledge that universities strive to uphold [7,9]. Moreover, it poses a significant threat to the safety and well-being of those entrusted with maintaining a secure educational environment.

Available literature suggests that the reasons behind student-on-staff violence dynamics can be multifaceted. Factors such as increased student stress levels, mental health issues, societal changes, or even personal conflicts with staff members could contribute to these acts of violence [2,5,10]. Some students may feel frustrated, marginalized, or unheard, leading them to resort to aggression to express their grievances or exert control [3,11]. Previous studies report that educators lament that the increase in education-related violence – particularly against educators by students – has its roots in drug and substance abuse by the latter [12,13]. Granted, learners under the influence of drugs arguably tend to behave in unconventional ways. Yet, recent research suggests that the increase in delinquent behavior is rooted in corrupt and unethical institutional management systems [14, 15]. This is informed by the contention that authoritarian management systems cause students to view themselves as outsiders against systemic oppression where their voices are not heard [16,17]. While very little is documented about violence towards university staff, some commonly reported forms of student violence on staff include physical assault, verbal abuse, and cyber-attacks [11,14]. Reports of students attacking educators are concerning and have received widespread attention because they tend to create a sense of insecurity in educators, thus significantly affecting the teaching process [9,18,19]. Cyber-attacks often take the vicious form of demeaning posts on social media, which appear to play a prominent role in the onslaught against educators [8, 11]. In South Africa, the literature on how students perpetrate violence on staff is generally limited to violent protests where staff become victims of students' grievances [20-22]. As such, the study sought to explore experiences of violence that students were perpetrating against staff and determine the extent to which these were happening.

### ***Theoretical framework***

This study was grounded on Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) which explains that persons who perceive unfairness in regulations and the conduct of those in authority are likely to engage in violence and delinquent behavior [23]. Agnew defined strain as any relationship in which others treat an individual in a way they do not want to be treated [23]. Thus, strain can be objective (conditions or events disliked by the majority members of a group) or subjective (conditions or circumstances opposed by only those experiencing them or those who have experienced them) [24,25]. The GST argues that three main categories of strain were the source of negative emotions that translated into deviant and violent behaviors [23, 24]. These three categories were: i. failing to achieve positively valued goals, ii. the removal of positively valued stimuli from the individual, and iii. the presentation of negative stimuli [23]. Accordingly, when an individual is presented with a strain and they do not have the necessary legal coping mechanisms, they usually degenerate into violent or criminal conduct to counter the strain. It is important to emphasize that the GST posits that only a few persons exposed to strain resort to delinquent or violent behavior because the rest have access to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping strategies [23].

It is argued that the GST as a framework offers explanations for various deviant behaviors, including bullying, assault, verbal abuse, vandalism, and many other forms of aggression which may

occur at universities [26]. The GST further postulates that experiencing these strains may increase the likelihood of negative emotions surfacing (e.g., anger, anxiety, hate, frustration, etc.), which may spur violent conduct [27-29]. The GST was deemed appropriate for this study because it provided a basis for understanding that students who often engage in violence against staff consider life unfair, unjust, and brutal. This aligns with the argument that authoritarianism is a source of the violence produced in educational institutions. In South Africa, studies have demonstrated that it is not uncommon for students to express their dissatisfaction and discontent through violent and destructive behavior [16, 30]. This helps to explain why violent protests have plagued South African universities, often ending in vandalism, arson, and other forms of volatile conduct [31,32].

## **METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative approach to comprehensively investigate the nature of student-on-staff violence at selected South African universities. Within the framework of this approach, the researcher employed a phenomenological research design to understand and describe the essence of student-on-staff violence in universities. This was because the design was best suited to examine participants' individual experiences, taking into account the multiplicities of truth [33]. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with staff and students at three institutions to elicit the specific manifestations of violence observed within their respective campuses. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method wherein self-reported perpetrators, victims, and witnesses of student-on-staff violence were selected to participate in the study. The researcher obtained ethical clearances from each of the universities' Research Ethics Committees and gatekeeper permission to engage with their students and staff. Invitations to participate in the study were circulated for three months at each participating institution, after which 32 students and four staff members were selected to participate. In analyzing the data from the interviews, the researcher followed the six steps of thematic analysis to identify the meaningful patterns and themes in the collected data [34]. The first step was to familiarize with the data – in this step, the researcher transcribed the data, read it repeatedly, and noted down initial codes. This was followed by generating initial codes – here, the researcher coded interesting features of the data systematically by collating the data that was relevant to each code. The third step was to search for themes – in this step, the researcher collated codes into potential themes and gathering relevant data to support the theme. The themes were then reviewed by checking if the themes work in relation to the codes generated initially. This was followed by defining and naming the themes where the researcher refined the specifics of each theme and generating clearer definitions and theme names. The final step was to generate the report and selecting vivid and compelling extracts as presented in the results section.

## **RESULTS**

To gain greater insight into how this student-on-staff violence was being experienced in different universities, the qualitative findings are invaluable, revealing that students are not only victims of violence at the hands of staff and their fellow students but also that they perpetrate violence against staff members. In this regard, the prominent features of violent experiences were student protest-related violence, verbal abuse, and physical assault.

### ***Student protest-related violence***

The study's findings suggest a common site for student-led violence on staff was when students embarked on protests. The participants admitted that staff members were often targeted when protests turned violent. One student reasoned:

*"None of the staff in the Financial Aid Office feel safe because they feel as if students at any time can threaten their lives. Last year, the staff [were] locked in their offices to clear out allowances for students, but these are people you are holding hostage because you want money. You also hold people hostage, and lectures cannot happen because of strikes. In university, we have been taught how to strike properly. I do Commerce. The Labour Law tells us how to strike –you give notice in time, and everyone must know about it. Not here! It is an intrinsic thing, and we are growing with it [i.e., students are becoming socialized into striking whenever they wish, as opposed to sitting down and discussing issues*

*with management] – it will worsen severely at institutions that lack diversity". (Student 2, University Z)*

Another student participant stated,

*"Students also perpetrate violence during strike actions and mass demonstrations. Students may have grievances that cause them to attack properties belonging to staff members of the institution". (Student 14, University X)*

Student protests and demonstrations were identified as serving as an excuse to perpetrate violence against staff. During protests, students were observed using violent means to deny access to fellow students and staff members who sought to continue with the university's activities. In this regard, a participating staff member opined,

*"My experiences of violence related to political and social protests, where roads and access to the campus are blocked, and there are intimidatory practices employed to stop people from entering [...] the campus. I can't judge who exactly is responsible, but based on the numbers, I would say they look like students mostly. I hear that there are student websites and social media pages where students plan and mobilize such actions. We must learn how to present arguments without resorting to violence". (Lecturer 1, University Z)*

### **Verbal abuse and physical assault**

The study findings suggest that students sometimes confront staff members verbally and physically. In some instances, verbal abuse was deployed as a precursor to physical assault. A student participant revealed,

*"Students also beat staff members at this university. Sometimes it is because of misunderstandings, for example, when a staff member provokes a student". (Student 15, University X)*

This was corroborated by another participating student, who noted,

*"Violence in my university is also committed by students on staff in efforts to prevent all learning activities during protests. This violence ranges from verbal threats, and when such threats do not work, the students resort to actions like physical assault. It is common with most protests here". (Student 8, University Z)*

A participating lecturer corroborated these experiences, noting,

*"I know of some cases where there have been heated exchanges of maybe abusive words between students and lecturers. You may find a student deliberately disrupting an online class where they have logged in using a name that is not their own and disrupting classes. They may sing, and it becomes chaos when one tries to stop them. Some unpleasant words may end up being exchanged". (Lecturer 1, University X)*

A student participant reasoned that verbal and physical violence was being perpetrated by students under the influence of alcohol, explaining,

*"I think here violence is experienced primarily because of alcohol – when students are drunk, they beat securities [security guards], and they become insolent. They perpetrate violence when they are highly intoxicated by alcohol. I think the staff is less involved in violence because they understand the temperaments of teenagers and the like". (Student 19, University X)*

As the findings reveal, the violence students inflict on staff predominantly happens in the form of protest-related violence, verbal abuse, and physical assault. Some participants noted that protest-related violence destroyed staff property, intimidatory practices, and (perhaps the most baffling) holding staff members hostage.

### **DISCUSSION**

An interrogation of the explanations that various studies offer for instances of violence in education may elucidate the findings reported here. Some studies suggest that students' violence on staff is associated with drug and substance abuse at educational institutions [12,13]. Nevertheless, the present study's findings point to a different root, namely authoritarian management styles, which dismiss student concerns and are deaf to students' voices. Studies on institutional management conclude that students in undemocratic institutional cultures view themselves as outsiders being pitted against systemic tyranny, which denigrates their views [15,19]. Student-on-staff violence is

baffling for most stakeholders, as it is deemed emblematic of an attack on education systems and has connotations of direct threats to those mandated with promoting security within the educational milieu. Attacks on staff by students tend to create employee insecurity and significantly affect teaching and learning [11,18,19].

One may argue, by extension, that the violent protests witnessed in universities are not dissimilar from the generally violent character of the protests in South African communities. The general outlook of community protests due to a lack of service delivery has, more often than not, been used to showcase the strength of protesters against a government they perceive as unjust. Such sentiments and actions date back to the apartheid era when communities mobilized against a perceived evil regime [31,32]. University students often perceive university management and staff as oppressive and undemocratic, giving agency to the militancy witnessed at HEIs [16,21,30,35]. The most prominent of these strikes and demonstrations was the (in)famous #FeesMustFall movement, which brought South African higher education to a standstill as students campaigned for the transformation of HEIs in South Africa, among which was access to higher education [16,20,36]. Protesting students regarded the South African higher education system as a relic of the diabolical apartheid past and joined forces to resist this perceived oppression [21,37,38]. Perhaps these students view staff members as "the face" of the system, and when they attack staff, they feel that they are sending a message to the authorities. This is troubling for South African education, particularly higher education, as one would expect to see roundtable discussions rather than militancy.

Most of the experiences the participants reported in the present study point to retaliation against staff members for perceived injustices being committed by staff. The GST is instructional in offering a theoretical landscape from which to navigate student-on-staff violence [23]. The theory is conceived of three categories of strains leading to negative emotions, which ultimately degenerate into aberrant behavior: failure to achieve positively valued goals, removing positively valued stimuli, and presenting negative stimuli [23,27]. Retribution, in the form of verbal and physical fights, points to the presentation of negative stimuli. This response corroborates the theoretical lens offered by the GST, which contends that the expression of negative stimuli may provoke aggression and other negative responses, even in cases where alternative pathways exist for redressing the negative stimuli [23,26]. The participants' views in this study pointed to students responding with violence to perceived injustices and retaliating when violence is committed against them by staff members. The GST also provides direction concerning the anticipated or actual loss of positively valued stimuli. As reported in the qualitative findings, this gives pause to reflect on the nature of violent student protests in which staff were targeted. Targeting staff may point to an attempt by protesting students to retrieve positively valued stimuli – in this case, protests related to student funding and security on campus, as reported by the participants. This actual or anticipated loss of positively valued stimuli is said to lead to delinquent behavior, as an individual seeks to (i) retrieve the lost stimuli, (ii) find a substitute for the stimuli, (iii) prevent the potential loss of the stimuli, (iv) retaliate against those responsible for the loss, and (v) manage the adverse effects of the loss of the stimuli [23,27]. In light of our findings, student-on-staff violence warrants policymakers' attention in South African universities.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study sheds light on a concerning aspect of violence at South African universities: student-on-staff violence. The findings reveal that such violence often takes the form of protest-related violence and verbal abuse, and physical assault of staff members. The study found that these acts of violence can be seen as a response to perceived systemic abuses and authoritarian governance within selected South African higher educational institutions. While some reported instances of violence were retaliatory, there are also cases of unprovoked violence by students on staff, including incidents such as drunken assaults on campus security personnel and disruptions of lectures on online platforms. The consequences of student-on-staff violence were found to extend beyond immediate harm and damage, including feelings of insecurity and anxiety among lecturers and support personnel, ultimately impeding university teaching and learning experiences. Such violence undermined the fundamental principles of academic institutions and created a hostile and

unsafe environment for stakeholders. The study thus recommends that South African universities prioritize their staff member's safety and well-being by fostering open dialogue, encouraging constructive engagement, and establishing mechanisms for conflict resolution. Additionally, it will be essential to address the root causes of student-on-staff violence, including the need for democratic governance, respect for diverse perspectives, and an inclusive educational environment that values the voices and concerns of all stakeholders. By addressing these issues and implementing proactive measures, South African universities will be able to work towards creating an atmosphere of mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge and academic excellence can thrive in an environment free from violence and intimidation.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Written informed consent has been obtained from the participants to publish this paper.

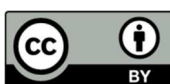
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