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The (Mis)application of the Western Concept of “Resilience” to Non-Western Crises: South Sudanese Women as Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The (Mis)application of the Western Concept of “Resilience” to Non-Western Crises: South Sudanese Women as Case Study

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This thesis involves an analysis of how the term “resilience” is mobilized and operationalized by groups and organizations that tout human rights as a main concern; I look to the relaying of South Sudanese women’s experiences to social justice workers as a case study, aiming to gain perspective from the women’s narratives of resilience. The purpose of this research is largely to critically engage with and question the resilience framework often referenced and taken for granted within modern human rights discourse. Qualitative research was conducted via interviews with eight individuals who have experience working with the South Sudanese population. Findings included five major themes: (1) the emphasis on social support and religiosity in South Sudanese culture, (2) a glaring lack of psychosocial services for traumatized refugees, (3) a trend toward pushing education for impact, (4) a leaning toward self-identifying as “survivor” among South Sudanese women, and (5) the futility of the resilience framework in non-Western contexts such as within South Sudan and the diaspora. I conclude that the resilience framework not only misses the mark when applied to non-Western contexts, such as humanitarian and human rights efforts have erroneously applied it to South Sudanese women and their experiences of conflict-related gender-based violence, but that the application of this framework in this way may even be considered to be a dangerous application.

Key Terms: conflict, cultural-sensitivity, epistemological violence, gender-based violence, human rights discourse, resilience, South Sudan, South Sudanese women, trauma
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Dedications

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For the children of South Sudan, who deserve so much more than they are given. You are not forgotten.
Abbreviations

Africa ELI – Africa Education & Leadership Initiative
APA – American Psychological Association
ARCSS – Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
AU – African Union
CEDAW – the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
EMU – Eastern Mennonite University
GBV – Gender-Based Violence
IGAD – Intergovernmental Authority on Development
JRS/USA – Jesuit Refugee Service/USA
LIRS – Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service
MDG – Millennium Development Goals
PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SDG – Sustainability Development Goals
SPLM/A – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement and Army
SPLM/A-IE – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement and Army in Government
SPLM/A-IO – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement and Army in Opposition
STAR Program – Strategies for Trauma Awareness & Resilience Program
TGoNU – Transitional Government of National Unity
UDHR – Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN – United Nations
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
UNMISS – United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan
VAW – Violence Against Women
WHO – World Health Organization
The (Mis)application of the Western Concept of “Resilience” to Non-Western Crises: South Sudanese Women as Case Study

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Violation of Human Rights: VAW in Conflict

Violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive and rampant of all human rights violations. One out of every three women in the world becomes a victim of gender-based violence in her lifetime (Amnesty International USA 2015; UN Women 2016; World Health Organization n.d.). In 1993, the United Nations first defined gender-based violence as any form of violence “that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (United Nations 1993). This definition focuses on women and girls as the primary targets of gender-based violence, although it should be stated that men and boys may also become targets of such violence despite the fact that this is much less commonly the case. For the purpose of this thesis, the term gender-based violence may be used interchangeably with violence against women. Violence against women encompasses a wide range of violence, sometimes referred to as a “spectrum,” such as acts of domestic violence, the forced marriage of girls to adult men, sexual slavery and trafficking, and honor crimes (Edleson, Lindhorst, & Kanuha 2015: 3). For other scholars, sexual violence can be re-imagined as existing along a “continuum” (Guy 2006: 4).

Many communities are impacted by mass violence and research has shown that rates of gender-based violence increase in times of conflict (UNDP n.d.; World Health Organization 1997; Rehn & Sirleaf 2002: 9). Feminist scholars have spent decades researching violence against women and girls as it occurs around the world, including conflict-related gender-based violence. It is well known that women and girls are among the most vulnerable civilians in times
of armed conflict and unrest (UN Security Council 2008: 1). Gender-based violence is commonly utilized “...as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instil[1] fear, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilians from community or ethnic groups; perpetrated in this manner it can persist long after the cessation of hostilities.” The UN Security Council also utilizes Resolution 1820 to assert that violence perpetrated against women during times of armed conflict is to be framed as a severe violation of human rights, stating “that rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute a war crime, a crime against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide...” (3). The absolute condemnation of all sexual violence by the UN elevates this form of violence against women to a public problem. Historically, rape and other forms of sexual violence have been privatized as personal issues to be dealt with inside the confines of the nuclear and extended family unit. Elevating sexual violence perpetrated against individuals in times of armed conflict to the status of a war crime or crime against humanity shifts the responsibility of protecting citizens and seeking justice on the behalf of those victimized onto the State. The UN Security Council further demands that “...Member States...comply with their obligations for prosecuting persons responsible for such acts, to ensure that all victims of sexual violence, particularly women and girls, have equal protection under the law and equal access to justice, and stresses the importance of ending impunity for such acts as part of a comprehensive approach to seeking sustainable peace, justice, truth, and national reconciliation...”. This demand acknowledges that the international community has agreed that states must play an active role in ending violence against women; the realization of sustainable peace simply requires that women and girls be protected from violence.

1.2 Trauma & Resiliency

There have been efforts made to shift the rhetoric in research on women’s experiences of
violence from woman as “victim” to woman as agentic “survivor.” Over the past few decades, the “victim” identity has become deeply stigmatized and has been largely rejected by those working to end violence against women. With this, survivorship and survivor discourse has become highly politicized. The overall visibility and championing of survivorship has contributed to the rising of a kind of resilience framework utilized by proponents of ending violence against women globally. Clear linkages can be drawn between the usage of resilience theory and the popularization of referring to women as “survivors.” Referring to women who have survived gender-based trauma as “resilient” pays homage to the extreme emotional, and sometimes physical, struggles involved in carrying on with one’s life following the worst imaginable circumstances. As such, it is quite common to see the terms “survivor” and “resilient” overlap and, at times, they may even be used interchangeably. Women’s accounts of resiliency have been valued by those who study gender-based violence, by those around the world who actively work to make gender justice a priority within their communities, as well as by those women and girls currently in need of support and inspiration that they too can survive the violence perpetrated against them.

Calling women who have experienced conflict-related gender-based violence “resilient” has both positive and negative consequences. On the surface, this term seems to lift women up and to define them as strong and powerful. Surely this is something feminists have aimed to accomplish with their politics. Imagining women who have been traumatized as “resilient” enables these women to occupy a space of strength rather than the space of the stigmatized victim. It calls attention to the agency of women who, although they have been victims of horrific trauma, are able to survive and actively make choices about their futures and those of their families. Referring to women as “resilient” also sends a message to other women and girls
who may someday endure such trauma and injury at the hands of men; it tells them something they may not be accustomed to hearing: “yes, you can survive.” Yet, at the same time, the negative consequences, although seemingly subtle and maybe even a little contrived at first, cannot be ignored. Referring to women who have endured conflict-related gender-based violence as “resilient” personalizes the survival of these women in a way that moves the discussion of violence against women away from where it needs to be. Instead of calling attention to the problems of patriarchal violence and the very real effects it has on women and children, the resilience agenda applauds individual women for the personal characteristics that have enabled them to survive such horrors. It congratulates the survivor without criticizing the root cause of the violence that had to be survived. Patriarchal violence risks being normalized as something women must endure; it slowly becomes a “fact of life” for women, a process that seemingly occurs right under our noses.

1.3 Contextualizing Resiliency: the Survival of South Sudanese Refugee Women

It is important to remain critical of who uses the term “resilient” to refer to women who have experienced conflict-related gender-based violence. In order to do so, I have chosen the current conflict plaguing South Sudan as a case study. South Sudanese women and girls have endured massive amounts of violence at the hands of military personnel, international peacekeepers, as well as by the men and boys they live amongst. In times of war, girls are often the first members of society to be abused; the situation of the South Sudanese girls has been and continues to be no different. Far too often, South Sudanese women and girls are forced to bear the burdens of war on their bodies. As some South Sudanese women are able to take refuge in the United States, various non-profits and other organizations have a hand in assessing the needs of these vulnerable refugees. This is the point at which this thesis seeks to explore the usefulness
of the resilience framework utilized by those in the helping professions who claim to be concerned with human rights; the goal is to investigate the impact of the resilience framework as it is applied to refugee women who have experienced conflict-related gender-based violence prior to migration, even if only by exploring the application of that framework by means of a single case study.

In some places and among some people, the term “survivor” has not emerged as a celebrated social identity. Women often struggle in silence or risk bearing the social burden of being identified as “victim.” For these women, there is no liberation to be had by constructing and occupying a “survivor” space and it simply does not make sense for them to do so. Still, U.S.-based refugee women like those from South Sudan often find that they are referred to as “resilient” and are applauded for their survival. Whether or not women in this population self-identify as “resilient survivors,” there is no doubt that U.S.-based organizations frequently make resilience-building a core objective of their work. South Sudanese women unable to escape the crises in their homeland are also affected by the resilience framework, as it is utilized by the humanitarians and human rights activists who descend upon South Sudan to provide various forms of aid to those affected by conflict. Research for this thesis includes efforts to gain a better understanding of how South Sudanese women still in South Sudan, as well as diasporic South Sudanese women, have been affected by the resilience framework.

1.4 Epistemic Violence & the Exportation of Western Concepts to Non-Western Contexts

In the Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology, Teo provides a comprehensive definition of “epistemological violence”:

“Epistemological violence is a practice that is presented in empirical research articles, chapters, and books in psychology (and the social sciences), when theoretical interpretations of empirical results implicitly or explicitly construct the Other as inferior or problematic, despite the fact that alternative interpretations, equally viable, based on the data, are available. If an empirical difference is interpreted as inferiority or
problematizes the Other, whether this theorizing has epistemological or practical consequences, then one should speak of a form of violence that is produced in ‘knowledge.’ Interpretations of data turn into epistemological violence.” (Teo 2014: 594).

This definition is often utilized in psychology and psychiatry literature, especially in discussions of empirical studies, but modified versions of this term have been used by scholars of various fields. In the social sciences, the closely related term “epistemic violence” was introduced by Spivak in her 1988 analysis, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Teo explains that “Spivak applied the term epistemic violence to the knowledge practices of colonialism in ‘third-world’ countries” (595). It is Spivak’s definition of epistemic violence that much of this thesis’ analysis will rely on.

Spivak developed her definition of epistemic violence through analysis of Foucault’s theories on discourse and power and Said’s theory of Orientalism. Each of these theorists add valuable perspectives to the idea that there are some forms of knowledge that are produced by privileged people and that these forms of knowledge are often taken as objective truths. Knowledge accepted as objectively true in the West is commonly exported to non-Western contexts in the form of providing aid to those who lack privilege. Women who have experienced conflict-related gender-based violence in non-Western nations often find themselves subject to a Western philosophy of healing from trauma that incorporates the aforementioned resilience framework. In this thesis, I attempt to discuss the ways in which the exportation of the Western concept of resiliency to non-Western contexts is a form of epistemic violence and suggest that this exportation may have dangerous repercussions.

Chapter 2: Background

2.1 Women’s Rights Are Human Rights: Violence against Women and Girls

Women’s rights are human rights which are laid out by three critical human rights
instruments. First, Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), or the UDHR, entitles all people to the same rights, declaring that one may not be denied their rights due to their sex (Amnesty International USA 2015; United Nations 1948). Second, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), or CEDAW, prohibits discrimination against women in Article 1 and explains that women must be treated equally to men (United Nations 1979). Lastly, Article 1 and Article 4-c of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993) holds that it is the responsibility of the state to “prevent, investigate… and punish acts of violence against women,” regardless of whether those acts were perpetrated by state or non-state actors (United Nations 1993).

Although these human rights instruments clearly prohibit the mistreatment of women and girls and condemn violence against them, they have limited effectiveness as women’s rights are commonly marginalized, including within the pursuit for human rights itself. In many nations around the world, even in those places that have signed and ratified such human rights instruments, women and girls find that justice is often simply inaccessible to them. In many societies, violence against women and girls is treated as a private issue and one that the State has no business being involved with.

Important to note is the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, which took place in 1995 in Beijing, China. At this conference, the global status of the “girl-child” was reviewed and specific strategies for addressing major issues affecting girls were made (United Nations 1995). For example, Strategic Objective L.7. sought to “eradicate violence against the girl-child.” Actions to be taken ranged from protecting girls at work and in school to protecting girls in the home and within society overall. Twenty years after the Conference, girls everywhere survive a special kind of fearfulness and constant threats of violence. Still, the objectives
developed at the Conference are aspirational and are objectives which social justice workers actively try to clear.

More recently, the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), established in Paris, France in September 2015, feature a clear agenda for gender justice (United Nations 2015). This agenda seeks to extend the struggle for gender justice, which was addressed by the 2000 U.N. Millennium Development Goal (MDG) agenda under Goal 3, or the gender equality goal (United Nations 2000). Specifically, in the SDG agenda, Goal 5 calls for continued work towards gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Goal 10 is also of importance, as it calls for a reduction in inequality within and between nations. This undoubtedly affects women and girls as they are most often among the most underprivileged and vulnerable across societies. These agendas are aligned with the provisions of CEDAW and human rights efforts in general.

2.2 Situation in South Sudan: Historical Background & Current Condition

A. War-torn Sudan & the creation of South Sudan

Prior to decades of civil war, Sudan was under the colonial rule of Britain and Egypt (Johnson 2013: 25). From 1899 to 1955, Sudan was not its own nation. In 1956, Sudan became independent, but this independence brought with it an internal struggle for power, leading to the beginning of the first civil war. In this war, southern rebels challenged the Sudanese government as they sought autonomy for the South (“History of the Conflict,” n.d.). It wasn’t until 1972, with the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement, that the first civil war came to an end. This agreement allowed southern Sudan the autonomy it so fiercely desired.

After only one decade free of war, the second civil war began in 1983. This war arose out of tensions from “…then President Jaafar Nimein’s decision to introduce Sharia law.” This decision provoked the uprising of an army known as the Sudan People’s Liberation
Movement/Army, or SPLM/A, in the south. It is critical to point out that, at this time, not all of
the aforementioned human rights instruments had been in place yet and, even if they had been,
Sudan’s state of peril likely would have prevented women and girls from seeking help on the
international stage.

A military coup in 1989 destroyed negotiations between SPLM/A and the Sudanese
government as General Omar al-Bashir took power and became president. For over twenty years,
the Sudanese government and SPLM/A fought over resources, the South’s goal of winning self-
determination, and the struggle between Islam in the north and Christianity and animism in the
southern part of the state. It wasn’t until 2005 that a peace agreement was developed, but by that
time, two and a half million Sudanese had been slaughtered and between four and five million
Sudanese had been displaced.

In 2011, the southern part of Sudan held a referendum and it was then that a new nation
was born; in an almost unanimous vote, the people of the South voted to secede from the rest of
Sudan (“The Lost Boys of Sudan” 2014: 7). A staggering 98% of the population in the South
voted to secede (“Resiliency Definitions” n.d.). “Since independence on 9 July 2011, South
Sudan has struggled with good governance and nation building and has attempted to control
rebel militia groups operating in its territory. Economic conditions have deteriorated since
January 2012 when the government decided to shut down oil production following bilateral
disagreements with Sudan.”

Following the creation of South Sudan, many South Sudanese who had been living
abroad decided to return home to use their newfound skills and education to help rebuild their
country. Unfortunately, they returned home to find more tragedy. “In December 2013, political
tensions between factions loyal to President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Riek Machar
erupted into fighting in South Sudan’s capital, Juba” (“The Lost Boys of Sudan” 2014: 8). A major challenge in South Sudan is the question of security; the army actively threatens the civilian population (“History of the Conflict” n.d.: 2). As of 2014, thousands of South Sudanese have been killed and over one million of them were forced from their homes.

In August 2015, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) issued the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS), a peace pact signed by the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement and Army in Government (SPLM/A-IG) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement and Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) (Intergovernmental Authority on Development 2015; Vhumbunu 2016). President Salva Kiir signed as a representative of the SPLM/A-IG and first Vice President Riek Machar signed as a representative of the SPLM/A-IO. A transitional government, referred to as Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU), was established (Vhumbunu 2016). Ratified in September, the peace pact was designed to put an end to the civil war that had broken out in December 2013. The peace pact failed less than one year later.

B. Renewed conflict in South Sudan & the question of gender

Following the failure of the ARCSS in the early months of 2016, South Sudan made a speedy descent back into the same old familiar pit of violence. Girls are once again even more vulnerable to gender-based violence (“A New Generation of Lost Girls at Risk in South Sudan” 2014: 1). It has been well-documented that armed conflict brings with it an elevated number of cases of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence. Many children who have been orphaned live on the streets and, as a result, engage in prostitution. This is especially true of the nation’s capital, Juba. “To make matters worse, those that are supposed to protect children, including the police, are often complicit in their abuse.” The rampant exploitation of children
adds yet another heartbreaking layer to the story. Not surprisingly, most of the children being
exploited in this manner are girls.

With the resurgence of violence, there are few opportunities for girls to get help, as was
the case with the second Sudanese civil war. Once again, the international community remains
eerily silent on the situation in South Sudan. This time, even the boys’ stories are not being told,
let alone the stories of South Sudanese girls. It is almost like the world has turned a blind eye to
the tragedies which plague the South Sudanese. The people of South Sudan are, technically,
experiencing their first civil war, yet it was these same people who were forced to undergo the
first and second Sudanese civil wars many years ago (BBC n.d.). Thus, although South Sudan is
officially a new nation, the people’s memories of violence and trauma have not been erased.
According to the Council on Foreign Relations’ Global Conflict Tracker, over 50,000 South
Sudanese people have been murdered since December 2013 and 1.6 million South Sudanese
people have been internally displaced by the conflict (Council on Foreign Relations 2017). In
February 2017, the United Nations officially declared various parts of South Sudan to be
experiencing famine, openly acknowledging that this famine is a product of civil war and a
failing economy (BBC n.d.).

2.3 Genealogy of “Resilience”: Women’s Resiliency to Conflict-Related GBV

A. Emergence of the term “resilience”

The term “resilience” is derived from the Latin word resilio, meaning “to leap or spring
back” (Lewis & Short 1879; Manyena 2006). Despite its somewhat ambiguous history, it has
been used for thousands of years (Anon. n.d.). It was first officially defined in the West in an
early dictionary named the Glossographia (1656); this dictionary was written by an Englishman
named Thomas Blount who was known as an “antiquary and lexicographer” (Mortimer 2004).
Blount defined “resilience” in two ways: (1) “to rebound,” and (2) “to go back on one’s word” (Alexander 2013:2709). Although the term “resilience” has been used across a number of fields ranging from “physics to ecology,” modern usage of the word owes its popularization to psychology and psychiatry studies (Cherry 2013; Divine 2012). “The bulk of literature on resilience and related psychological constructs of ‘hardiness’, ‘mastery’ and ‘thriving’ in the face of adversity was historically located in social psychology in general and developmental psychology in particular” (Bradby et al. 2010:128).

Resilience studies was formed in the United States in the 1940s, largely as a result of the work of a few highly influential psychologists such as Norman Garmezy and Emmy Werner (Alexander 2013:2712; Divine 2012; Harlow 2009). Specifically, Garmezy has been referred to as “the grandfather of resilience theory” (Bazeloni 2006; Harlow 2009; Vernon 2004:16). Garmezy spent decades studying people with schizophrenia, noting that some of the people he studied seemed more able to navigate their lives than others with the same disorder. This led him to question what he referred to as their “competence” and he eventually decided to shift his attention to the children of people with schizophrenia (Vernon 2004:16). Garmezy found that the majority of the children he studied were able to lead healthy, productive lives despite the adversities they had faced. Garmezy’s work on resilience peaked in the 1980s as he left behind the term “competence” and began using the term “resilience” (Alexander 2013:2712).

Garmezy believed there had to be some sort of explanation for those individuals he observed who were thriving in spite of the challenges they had faced. A large number of the children he observed were somehow able to come to terms with the trials they had experienced and seemed to have developed certain life skills that enabled them to prosper when it would have been quite easy for them to give up. “Calling for the field to shift its focus away from the study
of risk factors, he suggested that future research be directed toward understanding ‘the forces that move such children to survival and to adaptation’” (Vernon 2004:16). This paradigm shift is a result of the introduction of positive psychology, a branch of psychology that seeks to take a strengths-based approach rather than focus on people’s shortcomings and deficits (Good Therapy 2016). Garmezy’s research on resilience and mental wellness in youth is in large part the foundation for today’s research focusing on helping people of all ages survive and thrive despite their experiences of trauma and disaster around the globe.

A critical paradigm shift in resilience studies occurred in the 1980s with the introduction of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) into psychology and psychiatry literature (Agaibi & Wilson 2005:203). However, PTSD is a Western disorder and this model, although often assumed to be universal, may not apply to people in non-Western contexts (Sherwood 2009:24-5). Further, the PTSD model is very individualistic and does not entirely apply to situations of collective suffering due to armed conflict and mass violence situations (Bradby 2010:79). In effect, scholars quickly found it necessary to expand their study of trauma survivors beyond those who exhibited the classic and characteristic symptoms of PTSD.

Some studies of vulnerable populations exposed to severe trauma continued to focus on the mental health of combatants and others exposed to wartime stressors from a Western viewpoint. Two examples of these studies are King et al.’s (1998) study of Vietnam veterans and Gold et al.’s (2000) study of former prisoners of war (POWs) who served in World War II and Korea (Agaibi & Wilson 2005:204-5). Others, however, questioned the resilience of people in non-Western contexts. For example, Judith Zur studied the psychological effects of the civil war waged between 1980 and 1983 in Guatemala, also referred to as La Violencia, against the Quiché Maya peoples (Zur 1993:27). Zur even wrote about how the Western concept of PTSD failed to
capture trauma response in non-Western cultures, highlighting the importance of considering the local context (Zur 1996a: 312). Among the Quiché Maya peoples, Zur explains that a solid belief in fate and a perception that the spirits of those killed in La Violencia carry great influence over those still living are two major aspects of a specific cultural trauma response (308-310). When the local context is taken into consideration, varying interpretations of traumatic events emerge and the resulting emotions are expressed in distinct ways. Zur notes that somatization is more likely to occur in cultures that view emotional vulnerability as threatening (312). Overall, Zur’s point is that the local context must be better understood by mental health professionals seeking to understand symptoms as they can be expressed in a myriad of ways across various cultures. She recommends introducing “an anthropological approach - which entails looking at how people make sense of their worlds through their own concepts,” noting that this approach “would lead to a better understanding of how unprecedented stressful events are explained and dealt with by the people experiencing them. This would achieve a meaningful and useful (experience-near) understanding of the effects of war and atrocity rather than the distorted image produced by the application of an individualized (experience-distant) schema based on Western cultural concepts” (314).

B. Using the term “resilient” to refer to women who have experienced GBV

The history of how the term “resilient” began to be applied specifically to women who have experienced gender-based violence, whether locally or globally, is quite unclear. Davis and Buskist briefly review resilience theory and discuss the connection between resilience and the emergence of survivor discourse (2007: 194). After explaining the conceptualization of resilience as a form of post-traumatic growth, the authors state that “…resilience is the process of victims becoming survivors who go on to thrive in their lives.” Following this line of thinking, linkages
can be drawn between the usage of resilience theory and the popularization of referring to women as “survivors.” As previously stated, it is not unusual to see the terms “survivor” and “resilient” overlap or used interchangeably.

Survivor discourse owes its existence to feminist critiques of victim discourse. However, it is noteworthy that victim discourse also owes its existence to feminist efforts to raise awareness of violence against women and girls as a result of patriarchal oppression and efforts to rally support for ending such violence. “To cast a battered woman as an innocent victim with little or no choice may have been an effective strategy, especially in the early stages of women’s activism against intimate violence, but these images themselves have been contentious from the very beginning” (Dunn 2005:6). Just as quickly as activists constructed the “victim,” others countered this image with an image of their own; thus, the “survivor” and the “victim” were placed at two opposite ends of the same continuum (Gupta 2014). At one end of the continuum is a strong and agentic woman, sometimes nearly depicted as some sort of warrior goddess; at the other end is a frail and powerless woman, pictured as overly dependent upon others for basic survival (both emotional and physical). The powerless woman yearns, even prays, for her chance to win back the dignity and honor imagined as having been so violently taken from her. “[Some activists] argued that constructions of battered women as passive and trapped pathologized them, cast them as deviant, and failed to recognize them as active agents” (Dunn 2005:13). While the “victim” has been seen as one who deals with the legal system following a crime, the “survivor” is positioned as someone who has suffered a deeply personal experience and lived to tell others. The term “survivor” began being used “…by feminist groups organizing against the sexual abuse of children in the 1980s and has since broadened in scope and gone mainstream” (Sehgal 2016). To the individual women themselves, being identified as a “victim” carries with it a harsh social
stigma and, according to Boyle, “simply having a stigmatized identity can impair well-being” (2016: 52). Thus, it seems that a woman would prefer to be referred to as a “survivor” rather than a “victim.” Yet both the “victim” and the “survivor” are objects of oppression, albeit on opposite sides of this dichotomy (Profitt 1996: 30).

One need only glance briefly at the conflict literature to learn that the violence of conflict leaves lasting scars on those who endure it. Yet even in the worst imaginable situations, somehow, people come out on the other side of the trauma they experience. Specifically in the context of women who have endured conflict-related gender-based violence, “women war survivors actively reconstruct their identities and demonstrate remarkable resilience” (Sherwood 2009:32). Perhaps it is this active reconstruction that makes it so easy to refer to them as “resilient.” Because the women are viewed as actively doing something, it becomes unnecessary for others to criticize their behavior; their rejection of passivity “lets them off the hook” and this enables them to be viewed as “survivors.” Conversely, when women fit the passive “victim” mold, they are often blamed for their victimization. In a culture where rape is normalized, commonly referred to as a “rape culture,” victim-blaming is so prevalent that it becomes another aspect of day-to-day life.

Aside from the judgment those with firsthand experience of gender-based violence often endure from society as a whole, various critiques of victimhood emerged from academia and the activist sphere in the 1990s. On issues relating to sexual violence and victimhood, some feminists felt that mainstream feminism glorified the “victim” identity in its approach to dealing with gender-based violence in the United States at that time (McCaffrey 1998: 266). These feminists began to identify as “power feminists” and they referred to the kind of feminism they opposed as “victim feminism.” Power feminists worried about a kind of feminism that reinforced
the notion that women were powerless in society and they criticized the “victim” identity as a whole. Some of these critics included Katie Roiphe (1993), Camille Paglia (1994), Naomi Wolf (1993), and bell hooks (1984). Most of these critics wrote about how victim feminism focused too much on the suffering of women and some even asserted that the “victim” identity was an identity only to be claimed by women with privilege and, therefore, that the legitimacy of this identity should always be questioned (267).

Rather than referring to women who have survived wartime rape as “victims,” those who utilize the term “survivor” hope to emphasize the ability of the individual to carry on despite severe trauma. Survivor discourse enables women to be viewed as strong; it is possible that framing women this way alleviates some of the social anxiety surrounding the sustainability of entire communities and cultures in the face of conflict, as women are so often assigned the responsibility of ensuring the continuation of humanity. Women are valued as bringers of life, are expected to perform never-ending emotional labor, and are thought of as the keepers and protectors of culture. Therefore, in times of conflict and unrest, perhaps it is envisioned that if women can be strong survivors then the whole of society can be capable of recovery and, in time, even prosperity.

According to Gupta, “describing women as survivors rather than victims was [used] to emphasise [sic] the positive, the heroic; it was a triumph of hope over despair, of the future opening up rather than closing down” (2014). However, as with any social identity, there are a number of benefits and consequences that must be considered when negotiating the “survivor” identity. An identity carries whatever meaning is socially ascribed to it and this meaning is not static. Where the “survivor” identity once seemed congratulatory, some have come to worry that putting the emphasis on the heroic survival of women risks the development of a kind of
If the “victim” was pathetic and undesirable, then the “survivor” is radiant, warrior-like, and maybe even “a little sexy.” From this viewpoint, what woman would, or could, choose the “victim” identity over the “survivor” identity? Thus, it becomes nearly required of women to assume the “survivor” identity and wear it as a badge of honor and as proof of their heroism. “Survivor” becomes the obligatory replacement for “victim.” James comments on how this kind of focus on the individual enables society to turn a blind eye to more systematic problems such as sexism (2015). Resilient women, then, may as well be forced into being just that.

Survivor discourse not only shapes the identities of many women and girls who have experienced gender-based violence, but it also has a great impact on the politics surrounding violence and laws and policies put in place to deter such violence. Currently, it seems that the feminist critique has come full circle as feminists begin to openly question the usefulness of survivor discourse in efforts to make radical statements about women who have survived gender-based violence. The resurgence of feminist interest in the capability of the “victim” identity to positively impact women is significant. In Gupta’s opinion, “…the insistence of ‘survivor’ does a disservice to feminism: ‘survivor’ celebrates the individual, but ‘victim’ recognises [sic] the enormity of the system [women] are up against, and its brutalising [sic] potential” (2014). Where feminists and others concerned about social justice have worked to make the personal more political (Hanisch 1969), survivor discourse could be conceived as a threat to the idea that there is an entire system that works to oppress women in patriarchal societies; there is a concern that survivor discourse could detract from the culpability of the patriarchy.

Calling someone a “survivor” highlights the individual’s personal strengths and applauds them for their resiliency. While there is nothing inherently wrong with supporting survivors in
this way, some feminists have raised concerns that survivor discourse puts the onus on individual women who have experienced violence at the hands of men and blurs the power dynamics of patriarchy. This is dangerous because it risks re-privatizing the problem of violence against women (making the political personal again) and allows those in power to continue to ignore their liability; if those in power do not have to face the part they play in this oppression, they are more easily able to avoid accountability.

Identity construction is a complex process impacted by discourse that is external to the individual. Many women who have experienced gender-based violence closely identify with the “victim” identity. Many other women choose to identify as “survivors.” Yet even more women have identities that are fluid and find that both (or neither) identities fit them. Leisenring found that the notions of responsibility and agency played a large role in how the women she interviewed identified themselves (2006: 326). For those women, claiming the identity of the “survivor” meant that they had successfully made it out of the abusive environment they had been subject to or that they no longer felt afraid of their abuser (325). Either way, the negotiation of these identities is strongly molded by discourse; this is why efforts to understand the nuances of that discourse are critical.

C. Operationalization and mobilization of the term “resilient”: South Sudan as case study

It is important to be aware of who uses the term “resilient” to refer to women survivors of conflict-related gender-based violence. In order to do so, I have chosen to investigate the usage of the resilience framework as it has been applied to the South Sudanese context as a case study. The violence generations of South Sudanese women have been subjected to is inarguably some of the harshest of our time. Analysis of some examples of how this term has been deployed by the media sheds light on the work the resilient framework does or doesn’t do in this specific non-
Western context.

A blog post in the online version of the Huffington Post provides a good example of how the term “resilient” has been operationalized and mobilized in referring to South Sudanese women who have experienced conflict-related gender-based violence:

“Women in South Sudan are resilient, empowered change-makers: they are farmers, journalists, youth leaders, teachers, poets. They support each other, their families and their communities. In a country at war, women have become the backbone of their communities because so many men have been killed or are away fighting. The women have been left to take care of homes and families, the sick and wounded, to tend the crops and livestock, and make all the decisions. Women are the unsung heroines in South Sudan’s turbulent history” (Byanyima 2015).

In this example, South Sudanese women are depicted as agents of change highly involved in the maintenance of their communities. Byanyima mentions their efforts of emotional labor and even refers to the women as “heroines.” Using the term “resilient” gives Byanyima and writers like her a springboard from which to shape the image of South Sudanese women. Instead of commenting on the victimhood of women caught up in the midst of war, the resilience platform draws from a strengths-based approach pointing to the need to advocate for women’s right to autonomy in the Third World context. Utilizing the resilience framework in this way seems to be quite positive, but as posts such as this one are often written for a Western audience, it is worth questioning the intent behind this need to advocate for the rights of women in non-Western nations. It is possible that the term “resilient” is being used as a buzzword to generate Western humanitarian concern for the brutal conditions in underdeveloped and developing countries like South Sudan. As Westerners are often so far removed from the kind of war-related experiences endured by non-Western people, highlighting non-Western conflict in Western media is crucial to expanding global awareness of human rights issues and various humanitarian crises. At the same time, however, we must be careful not to exploit the realities of people in the Third World.
For example, the plight of non-Western women has been leveraged by Western state actors who intend to wage war in Third World countries. Many have disapproved of how the United States’ campaign for waging the “War on Terror” largely depended upon narratives of rescuing Afghan women from Afghan men (Amnesty International UK 2013; Evans 2009; Khan 2010). Using the constant portrayal of how non-Western patriarchies violate women’s rights as bait for the Western public’s support of imperialistic war does a disservice to non-Western women, puts them and their children in harm’s way, and contributes to the pornification of non-Western violence in an effort to justify Western intervention.

A cover story for Doctors Without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres) featuring South Sudanese women as survivors of humanitarian crises frames these women as “wonder women” (n.d.). The following excerpt quotes an unnamed nurse who worked with some of these women on behalf of Doctors Without Borders:

“‘You can really see a sisterhood between the women in the ward, even if they don’t know each other, or they’re from different kin networks. They look after each other very well. They come in here having been beaten and raped. Still, you can see them grinning, chatting away after a while. They’re very resilient women.’”

Referring to South Sudanese women who have survived such humanitarian crises as “wonder women” comments on the superior characteristics and qualities of these women; it assumes that they have certain traits which have allowed them to survive heinous circumstances. Again, this individualizes such instances of survival and begs the question of what this means for other women who were unable to survive the trauma. Perhaps women are not expected to survive in the same way men are. The suffering of women and girls, then, becomes regarded as commonplace and routine, making instances of survival a surprise. Finally, the nurse’s quote also reveals that it is most desirable when women come together as a unit to survive trauma. Perhaps most telling is the reference to women’s smiles: this suggests that women can and should find
happiness following gender-based trauma. It is possible that Doctors Without Borders frames stories of traumatized women in this way as a strategy for garnering support and funding from governments and donors. The “wonder women”/resilient women narrative is favored in the West and incorporating it into media campaigns is probably a means to an end for organizations like Doctors Without Borders.

Analysis of how the term “resilient” has been operationalized and mobilized can be pushed further by looking critically at how other women are expected to play a huge role in leading their communities away from disaster in the African context. A story by Mercy Corps discusses gender inequality in the specific vulnerable African nations of Mali, Niger, and Nigeria (2014a). A part of the story is as follows: “This is what we call resilience: It’s not just about surviving the latest crisis, but preparing communities with new thinking, tools and resources to adapt and prevent future crises from hitting them so hard.” The story explains that women must deal with heavy burdens during times of crisis and points out that women and men experience social problems very differently. While this is important, Mercy Corps seems not to notice that their definition of “resilience” holds women responsible for a large part of community recovery, which is a huge burden in and of itself when one is already operating from a disadvantaged position. Interestingly, in their resulting report, Mercy Corps even admits that “research reveals that disturbances and crises often reinforce inequality, making already-bad situations even worse for marginalized gender groups, especially women and girls” (2014b:2). It seems thoughtless to instruct women to stand as fearless leaders in the very communities that actively and incessantly inflict violence upon them and their children. It is almost as if women are being held responsible for cleaning up the effects of what is quite often state-sponsored male violence so that the patriarchy can continue to avoid accountability, thereby maintaining the status quo. Pauline
Boss, a widely-respected clinical researcher, cautions against “…constantly embracing a resilience model that simply maintains the status quo of any given individual(s) or situation(s)” (Suri 2016). Like Doctors Without Borders, Mercy Corps’ expectations of what African women must do to rehabilitate their communities risk playing into the “wonder women”/resilient women narrative. Again, this narrative may only be supported by organizations like Doctors Without Borders and Mercy Corps because it is one that has been effectively used to bring in money from Western donors and support from Western governments. Ultimately, humanitarian organizations have work to do to reach their goal of helping people on the ground and if calling on favored narratives, no matter how problematic they might be, will bring in resources, then those organizations will continue to do so in order to continue their work.

D. Where might “resilience” get women?

Conceptualizing the survival of traumatized women as an effect of personal “resilience” appears to have grown out of a strengths-based approach to psychological trauma. Barbara Ehrenreich’s fascinating critique of Americans’ preoccupation with positive psychology leaves one with the feeling that Americans would rather blame the victim (any and all victims) than accept the possibility that optimism isn’t the answer to all of life’s struggles (2010). The process of victim-blaming is not new to the American psyche; in fact, it is everywhere and its effects are disastrous. For example, blaming the victim’s alcohol use or the outfit the victim was wearing at the time of the assault is commonplace. Another example of the prevalence of victim-blaming is the rampant use of rape jokes by the American public and in American movies, TV shows, and other forms of media. This acceptance of victim-blaming normalizes sexual violence and research has suggested that individuals who believe common myths about rape are less likely to step in when they witness some sort of sexual harassment or violence (McMahon 2010).
Ehrenreich’s critique of Americans’ pre-occupation with the brand of positivity/optimism previously discussed requires that they develop a belief that looking on the bright side is the best way to live one’s life, regardless of individual circumstances and traumas. This mindset may be the reason humanitarian organizations find the “wonder women”/resilient women narrative most useful. But there is a more menacing side to this conceptualization that reflects upon the patriarchal neoliberal paradigm underlying so many experiences within contemporary society. Referring to women as “resilient” survivors tends to personalize and privatize the highly political experience of war-time rape. “Compulsory survivorship depoliticizes our understanding of violence and its effects. It places the burden of healing on the individual, while comfortably erasing the systems and structures that make surviving hard, harder for some than for others” (Bolger 2014). This “compulsory survivorship” is created when women who have experienced sexual violence understand the stigmatization of being a “victim” and attempt to counter that stigma with the construction of a “survivor” identity (i.e. Popkin 2016; Ramkissooon 2013).

As the human rights, international law, and conflict discourses move to highlight rape as a weapon of war and as a war crime and violence against women more generally as a serious form of human rights violation, it becomes clear that resilience is not the answer it was once imagined to be within the fields of psychology and psychiatry. Largely, at least in the case of South Sudanese women and their experiences of conflict-related gender-based violence, it is not the women themselves who tend to comment on their own resiliency. Instead, this terminology comes from the mouths of Western humanitarian workers, psychologists, and media sources. As such, it is better to remain critical of this sort of discourse that refers to women, and especially non-Western women, as “resilient” survivors. This language may be used as a buffer between the West and those non-Western victims of the Western-sponsored violence we like to watch on our
televisions. For those in the West, this violence seems to be part of another world altogether, more reminiscent of the missions set by the newest warfare video game rather than the materializing nightmares of women in places like South Sudan.

If non-western women were claiming this discourse as their own in an effort to emphasize their strengths in times of war, it would not be as imperative to question the genealogy of these terms. However, it is a slippery slope that connects Western support for resilience and Western preoccupation with and exploitation of non-Western violence. Non-Western violence is sensationalized by Western media; for example, the continuous focus on al-Qaeda and ISIS by the American media serves to incite fear and anger from the American public, possibly as propaganda for United States intervention in non-Western affairs (i.e. Spencer 2017; Tomson 2017). The media’s focus on non-Western women who have been sexually victimized as part of the brutality of war within their nations speaks volumes about Western focus. The shift from media portrayal of women as “helpless victims” to “resilient survivors” (i.e. Baker 2017) suggests that the West no longer wishes to see the pain and the tears on our televisions and in our newspapers; perhaps the West has grown bored of such imagery. Instead, the West has generated an urgent need to paint “victims” as “survivors” so that Western guilt can be swept under the international rug. Perhaps the stories the West tells about the resilience of non-Western women is actually for our own selfish benefit and not for theirs.

Even in the Western context, it seems it is those with a history of being most hostile towards women who have experienced gender-based violence who have publically engaged in survivor discourse. In the United States, “the word [‘survivor’] has caught on with law enforcement, the Department of Justice and the White House Task Force on campus safety” (Sehgal 2016). For example, the First Report of the White House Task Force to Protect Students
from Sexual Assault refers to students who have experienced sexual violence as “survivors” (2014: 2). Just in 2016 President Obama made history by signing the newly introduced Sexual Assault Survivors’ Rights Act (Mallon 2016). Proponents of the act hope that it will help protect and empower sexual assault survivors, making certain regulations compulsory, such as those surrounding rape kits. While these changes would surely have positive effects on rape survivors’ access to justice in the eyes of the law, the fact that law enforcement and legislators are known to be in the habit of regularly discounting women reporting rape and other forms of sexual violence cannot be ignored. For example, a U.S. judge ruled in 2011 to dismiss a major case, known as Cioca v. Rumsfeld, in which 28 women and men sought to hold former defense secretaries accountable for the military’s failure to “crack down on rape” (Ellison 2011a; Ellison 2011b). In this case, a 1950 Supreme Court ruling that protects the military from being sued for injuries incurred by its soldiers was determined to be still relevant, even for sexual violence cases. In another example of legal disregard for women who have endured sexual violence, last year, reporters exposed the frequency with which police departments and detectives in Baltimore County, Maryland fail to enact due diligence by prematurely dismissing rape reports without investigation (Campbell and Baker 2016). These examples illustrate that, although considerable changes have been made in the legal treatment of rape and other forms of gender-based violence over the past few decades, rape survivors’ access to justice continues to be significantly impaired.

One interesting analysis posits that both survivorship and resiliency are things to be performed for the benefit of the oppressors (Bolger 2014). “…[T]he trauma recovery industry…imposes compulsory hopefulness and optimism in the service of neoliberal capitalist production” (Koyama 2011). The industry that embraces and encourages survivorship and often
relies on the resilience framework is the same one that promotes self-help schemes and advocates for the American way of “pulling one up by one’s boot straps”; this industry has also been exported abroad and has been caught up in Western humanitarian efforts that appear to some to be examples of masked imperialism. Bush, Martiniello, and Mercer (2011), Bricmont (2006), and Chomsky (2008) are just a few scholars who refer to the misuse of humanitarian and human rights goals for economic and militaristic gain as “humanitarian imperialism.” If it is true that survivorship and resilience discourses have been hijacked, then the resilience framework does nothing for those it so enthusiastically claims to uplift. Moving forward, one must question whether there is anything resiliency can be paired with in an effort to encourage social change.

It is possible that the real solution to eliminating shady discourse regarding women who have experienced gender-based violence involves the complete replacement of the term “resilience.” If resilience theory can be tied to victim-blaming by way of the logic that woman can avoid blaming and shaming from others by accepting the “resilient survivor” identity, it seems the optimism the resilience framework offers is quite empty. If the self-help trend provides fuel for the neo-liberal fire as it barrels down upon the oppressed, then it appears it is just another form of pseudo-science popularized by a media more interested in exploitation than making contributions to any social justice agenda. If survivor discourse has been hijacked by those in power, then we must recognize that, yet again, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1979).

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Foucault, Said, & Spivak

The ideas of Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak formed the theoretical foundation of this paper. The works of these three important figures shaped my
understanding of the relationship between discourse and power, the construction of knowledge and the colonization of that knowledge, the effects of Orientalism and the Western practice of othering, and the connection between privilege and violence. Pages and pages could be written on any one of these ideas so, for the sake of brevity, I aim to describe only the most pertinent aspects of the ideas previously listed.

Foucault was well-known for his writing on the relations of power, discourse, and knowledge. For Foucault, it seems that knowledge is the product of a relationship between power and discourse; that is, it is those most powerful and privileged people who formulate and direct the discourse that is to be taken as true knowledge in a given time and place. According to Schneck, Foucault means that “to know, to claim knowledge, to will truth, is to make reality, discursively and violently” (1987: 27-28). Those with privilege and power claim knowledge and, in the process, others’ systems of knowledge are violently subjugated. Foucault calls discourse a régime du savior, or “regime of knowledge”; it is a regime because it is aggressive, even violent. Foucault writes, “We must conceive discourse as a violence we do to things...” (1981: 67). This illustrates that discourse is part of a social process which, when conceived of in this way, it is easy to understand how it must be affected by power relations.

Said’s legacy was his 1978 book Orientalism in which he described how the East, or the “Orient,” was created by those in the West, or the “Occident,” to embody everything contrary to how the West conceptualized itself. The West constructed itself as the righteous and knowledgeable bringer of truth, freedom, and peace. Westerners were thought to be inherently intelligent, capable, and, above all, a just people. At the same time, those in the East were constructed as a backwards, ignorant, and violent people who required management and direction from the West, less they self-destruct. According to Said, the Western gaze toward the
East is prejudicial, racist, and is even, at times, responsible for romanticizing Eastern cultures to the extent that a dangerous mystique is produced. Those in the West tend to view those in the East as uncultured, unaware degenerates. Ultimately, Said’s Orientalism represents the power the West holds over the East. Foucault would categorize Orientalism as the Western “regime of knowledge.”

In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak asserted that the project of Orientalism, that casting of the East as “Other” by those in the West, was a prime example of epistemic violence (1988: 280-1). Epistemic violence involves the complete undermining and subjugation of any non-Western systems of knowledge (J.M. Weselby 2014). In the essay, Spivak discusses how the premier narrative, which is taken as truth over all other narratives, becomes normative and goes on to explain the resulting violent erasure of history and culture that significantly impacts non-Western individuals (1988: 281). In her gendered perspective of the othering of non-Western women, Spivak states that woman is made invisible at the intersection of patriarchy and imperialism, noting that “the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (306).

Each of these scholars’ ideas built upon those that came before him or her. From Foucault’s ideas about the formation of “regime[s] of knowledge” and the violence of discourse, Said’s concept of the “Orient” and an understanding of how the West’s power over the East is damaging, even deadly, could be developed. From Said’s example of Orientalism, Spivak developed the concept of epistemic violence and made even clearer the violence and oppression endured by non-Western peoples. She went even further to describe the displacement of the non-Western woman. The works of Foucault, Said, and Spivak have formed the theoretical
underpinnings of this research.

3.2 Ethnocentrism & Cultural Biases in Psychology & Human Rights Discourse

Ethnocentrism has been defined as “the act of applying the frame of reference from one’s own culture to someone or something belonging to another culture” (LeVine 2015: 167). This term often refers to “the belief that one’s own culture is superior to others, which is often accompanied by a tendency to make invidious comparisons. In a weaker form, ethnocentrism is the tendency to look at other cultures through the filter of one’s own cultural presuppositions” (Barfield 1997: 55). Social scientists are trained to acknowledge the dangers of theories, research methods, and modes of analysis that are not free of ethnocentrism and cultural biases. Yet, psychology scholars have commented that the Western way of doing things seems to become standardized and any non-Western approaches are subsequently marginalized (Teo & Febbraro 2003: 683). Summerfield traces the socially-constructed conceptualizations of mental illnesses, including those involving trauma, to perspectives on personhood (234). But Western ideas surrounding the notion of personhood often differ greatly from those in non-Western contexts. Summerfield posits that “the phenomenal rise of ‘trauma’, both as cultural idiom and as psychiatric category, may be linked to the emergence of this expressive and individualistically minded version of personhood, connected to the hopes and fears of modern life” (235). He adds that the healthcare sector has not been immune to the Western trend toward constant commodification, explaining that one of the results of this commodification is an obsession with medicalization, which, of course, enables the pharmaceutical industry to flourish (236). Summerfield’s analysis highlights the importance of recognizing the cultural specificity of knowledge, even forms of knowledge that may seem objectively scientific, such as psychiatry.

The field of human rights has also undergone major criticism by the academic
community; some scholars have flat out rejected the claim of universal human rights upon which most human rights work is predicated (Preis 1996: 288). Anthropologists have called the international legal framework utilized by human rights workers “ethnocentrically Western” and have pointed to the dangers of cultural relativism. The literature on ethnocentrism and academia, largely produced by anthropologists as a warning signal, can be connected to the literature on global health, the hegemonic trauma paradigm of PTSD, and the dangers of marginalizing indigenous psychologies and related systems of knowledge. According to Pedersen, “No independent evaluation has been conducted of the outputs and outcomes of trauma counselling [sic] programs in war zones, which are well intentioned but often driven by Western assumptions based on an oversimplification of the medical model” (2002: 186). Several scholars have criticized the utility of trauma programming that relies on the Western construct of PTSD (Bracken et. al. 1995; Summerfield 1999). Said and Spivak would surely express concern over the marginalization of non-Western understandings of trauma and the psyche by humanitarians and human rights workers who attempt to export Western frameworks to non-Western contexts.

More recently, Suarez is one scholar who calls for the integration of non-Western, local practices into more globalized trauma frameworks (2013). An example of a local, trauma-related practice is presented in Honwana’s exploration of how traditional healers in Mozambique frame war as a form of “social pollution” (1997: 299). Green and Honwana discuss purification/cleansing rituals performed by traditional healers to help children traumatized by war in Angola and Mozambique (1999: 2). These kinds of non-Western, local practices should be included in trauma programming used in non-Western contexts and should also be integrated into global health frameworks.

3.3 Where Might the Discussion Proceed?
Where the literature leaves off, my questions begin. The resilience framework is often taken for granted by psychologists and others in the helping professions as the most current, sensible, and sophisticated system of knowledge, a system of knowledge Foucault would refer to as a “regime of knowledge.” When this Western concept is applied to non-Western contexts, there can be risks to non-Western peoples. Zur states, “there are dangers in the relentless search for validation of PTSD in other cultures such as the worrying result that people do not have ‘it’ because their signs and symptoms do not coincide with the appropriate scale or, since they do not have PTSD, their experiences were insignificant” (1996a: 314). Non-Western people are further marginalized and can even be completely forgotten about when their experiences are viewed as insignificant. It is also problematic for Western mental health workers to impose diagnoses on non-Western individuals because those individuals may end up learning a version of the “victim” identity that requires them to remain helpless and dependent upon non-Western assistance.

The resilience framework seems to be readily accepted within the cultural context in which it was constructed; the framework speaks to Western conceptualizations of trauma and recovery. The problem proposed in this research lies in the (mis)application of that framework to other cultural contexts. If the resilience framework is to be applied outside of the Western context, it seems that it should at least be modified so that it addresses the cultural needs of the population within which it is being applied. The resilience framework focused on by this research is one that is strengths-based and is highly focused on mitigating post-traumatic stress responses among individuals and within communities who have endured conflict-related violence. But strengths and stress responses are highly cultural, meaning that the Western perspective on what makes a person adaptable to change and resilient to trauma is not one that easily translates to non-Western contexts. As illustrated by the previously mentioned research on
PTSD as a decidedly Western construct, interpretations of stress responses can vary across cultures. The Western resilience framework, then, is not “one-size-fits-all.” The resilience framework should be modified to better suit the various traumatized populations humanitarian and human rights workers aim to assist with their strengths-based programming.

Chapter 4: Present Research

4.1 Research Question

I aim to analyze how the term “resilience” is mobilized and operationalized by groups and organizations that tout human rights as a main concern while looking to the relaying of South Sudanese women’s experiences to social justice workers as a case study. The purpose of this research is largely to critically engage with and question the resilience framework often referenced in modern human rights discourse. I hypothesize that the resilience framework deeply impacts refugee women, such as the South Sudanese women who have fled to the United States to escape the armed conflict that continues to ravage their homeland. The exacerbation of gender-based violence during times of national unrest and growing conflict provides an extreme, yet not uncommon, field from which the resilience framework is so often deployed. By focusing on the stories of specific refugee women as relayed by social justice workers and others concerned with human rights, it is my hope that a unique lens will become discernible through which survivorship, issues affecting refugees, and a commonly-accepted resilience framework can be better understood. I aim to find out what work the resilience framework does in the context of a specific case study on South Sudanese refugee women and those who work with them to mitigate the effects of trauma.

4.2 Objectives

This thesis has four main objectives: (1) to investigate the social construction of women
who have experienced conflict-related gender-based violence as resilient survivors, (2) to explore narratives of resilience for South Sudanese women’s experiences as relayed by those who work with them following conflict, (3) to better understand how various organizations foster resiliency, however they may define it, in the South Sudanese context, and (4) to discuss the utility of the resilience framework as it is applied to refugee women who have experienced conflict-related gender-based violence.

I aim to find out whether humanitarian and human rights organizations that aid South Sudanese women utilize the term “resilient” when referring to the women they help and, if they do, I would like to gain a better understanding of how the conceptualization of the women they serve as “resilient survivors” impacts the women individually. I hope to discover something about what sorts of factors make diasporic South Sudanese women “resilient” in the eyes of those who work with them and explore how various organizations aim to foster resiliency, however they may characterize it, amongst this population. With violence being such a serious and widespread issue across all communities, it is important to remain critical of the frameworks organizations advertise as positive and helpful. Popular frameworks and paradigms cannot simply be taken for granted in a world where even those claiming to care most about ending all forms of human rights violations can and often do engage in harmful practices. For example, human rights organizations may unintentionally perpetuate victimization among the populations they serve and may inadvertently bulldoze over particular victims of human rights abuse while engaging in “strategic” litigation (Bukovska 2008).

4.3 Methodology

A. Theoretical framework

Feminist standpoint epistemology is a way of building knowledge that calls us to “(1) see
and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and (2) apply
the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change” (Brooks
2007). Yet it is more than just a way of building knowledge; it is also considered to be a method
of doing research. Those who utilize this feminist theory place women’s lived experiences at the
center of their research and work to understand how women’s experiences contribute to the
formation of women’s knowledge. This knowledge is seen as unique, valuable, and capable of
contributing to the growth of the societies in which we live. Feminist standpoint epistemology
has been critical to the formulation of the theoretical positioning of this thesis.

The utilization of the feminist theory of intersectionality has been championed in feminist
ethnography and research for decades. An intersectional approach encourages us to look closely
at how various identities and structures of domination work in tandem to create specific
experiences of oppression for individuals (Crenshaw 1989). In analyzing women’s lives, one
must pay attention to the ways race, class, and sexuality, among other categories of social
construction, impact lived experiences. Thus, it is not enough to group all women into a
monolithic category based on gender. For example, the way in which a heterosexual, white
woman experiences gender-based violence likely varies considerably from the way in which a
queer woman of color experiences the same phenomenon. Oppressive structures within a society
work differently to subjugate various subjects. Furthermore, women are sometimes forced to
choose between conflicting identities in order to alleviate social problems that affect them and
their children. It is also worth recognizing that the Western feminist framework of oppression is
not always accepted by non-Western women; thus, even this construct is one that we should be
critical of.

Feminist concepts such as “gender-based violence” and “patriarchy” are also central to
this thesis. Gender-based violence, previously defined, is a direct manifestation of patriarchy, or a system of oppression that privileges men and regards women as second-class citizens.

“Margaret Urban Walker proposes the concept of ‘gender normative violence’ to denote the routine coercion, domination, violence, and silencing of women and girls” (Mazurana and Proctor 2013: 3). As conflict is highly masculinized, it is no surprise that women and girls tend to bear the brunt of devastation from wartime activities on their bodies. Mazurana and Proctor apply Walker’s concept of “gender normative violence” to women's experiences in armed conflict, noting that it is a fact that women’s experiences of violence have historically been made invisible due to the acceptance and normalization of such violence against women. Fortunately, within the past few decades, feminists have been dedicated to promoting the visibility of women’s experiences of violence. Still, more work must be done to produce more nuanced gendered perspectives of armed conflict. This helps explain why the issue of violence against women and girls has taken so long to reach international recognition as a human rights violation.

The authors further explain the legitimization of violence against women, referring particularly to sexual violence, in times of armed conflict. It is this legitimization that allows rape to be conceived of as a suitable weapon of war. Finally, Mazurana and Proctor explain that, in times of armed conflict, women and girls are commonly used as a means to an end; they are raped, tortured, and killed as a way to assert what is often a racialized form of male dominance over entire communities. Thus, women and girls are not seen as human beings, but as mere extensions of the men and boys they live amongst. It is this kind of critical theorizing that has made conflict and gender literature most helpful in formulating the present study.

Social identity theory posits that social groups “provide their members with a shared identity that prescribes and evaluates who they are, what they should believe and how they
should behave” (Hogg 2016: 6). As identities are socially constructed, it is no surprise that
gender-based violence, whether interpersonal or conflict-related, often impacts the ways in
which women’s identities are developed. A large part of this thesis requires the exploration of
how identities are formed, specifically the “victim” and “survivor” identities, and how they can
be connected to the resilience framework.

The final portion of theoretical underpinnings is derived from psychology literature on
gender-based trauma during conflict, the development and usage of coping skills, and resiliency.
Specifically, the focus is on the relatively recent commitment to understanding resiliency
through the use of a cultural lens. Clauss-Ehlers describes “cultural resilience as the way that the
individual's cultural background, supports, values, and environmental experience help facilitate
the process of overcoming adversity” (2004: 28). For Clauss-Ehlers, then, the cultural context
always matters. Gunnestad develops three distinct categories of protective factors in his research
on resiliency and cross-cultural analysis: (1) “network factors,” (2) “abilities and skills,” and (3)
“meaning, values and faith” (2006). More generally, this breaks down the factors of resiliency
into the categories of “external support,” “internal support,” and “existential support.” Gunnestad
goes on to describe a perspective that takes up culture as a major source from which individuals
can exercise agency.

B. Research approach/methods

In recognizing and respecting the courage it takes women to step out from the darkness
that engulfs gender-based trauma, it was paramount that this research be approached in a
sensitive manner. The harshness of discussing experiences of gender-based violence, in general
and as it applies to armed conflict, cannot be taken lightly. I originally chose to make narrative
the center of analysis, not only to foster the opening up of a safe space for women to tell stories
of trauma in their own words, but also in an effort to position women as knowledgeable experts on the circumstances they encounter in their own lives. After some difficulty in locating South Sudanese women who were comfortable participating in research that aimed to tackle such a sensitive topic, it became clear to me that I would have to change my approach as well as my methods.

Rather than engaging directly with South Sudanese women, I decided to connect with those who spend time working with the women in an effort to increase their quality of life. Looking to organizations that claim to prioritize advocating for women who have experienced conflict-related gender-based violence and South Sudanese women in specific, I found eight individuals involved in providing services to the South Sudanese community who agreed to be interviewed. Organizations contacted included Jesuit Refugee Service/USA, Living Ubuntu, Africa Education & Leadership Initiative (ELI), Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service, and Samaritas. The last three contacts were a clinical psychologist with a private practice, an English tutor and member of a Methodist church, and the wife of a South Sudanese pastor and co-founder of a small organization that aids South Sudanese refugees settling in the United States.

The organizations contacted range from grassroots to major players involved in refugee resettlement and providing associated services. They operate in different places, but share a common idea of what it means to support refugees who have suffered war trauma. From these organizations, I contacted people who have worked with South Sudanese refugee women and interviewed them in order to better understand how their organizations help refugees, whether their organizations treated women as “victims” or “survivors,” what their organizations do to foster resiliency amongst the women, and why they feel resiliency is important in the first place. I aimed to gather narratives of the resilience of South Sudanese women as relayed by those who
As this research is highly influenced by an interpretivist paradigm, the research methods are qualitative in nature. As previously stated, data was collected via the administration of a short interview. Many of the questions asked were open-ended to allow for less restricted conversation. These are the methods I felt would best allow themes to emerge from the data and allow me to gain valuable insight into the usefulness of the resilience framework in the context of South Sudanese refugee women who experienced conflict-related gender-based violence.

C. Research design: sample, setting, and procedures

After researching organizations that were most likely to fit my criteria of working with refugee women and providing trauma services, I contacted over 90 organizations by e-mail and phone. Dozens of e-mails were sent to individuals and organizations I heard about through networking or were referred to by other various organizations. Many times, potential participants were located by way of reaching out to organizations, explaining the objective of this thesis, and by being given leads to other individuals who work in the field. When the appropriate member of a certain organization contacted me about my project, I explained my intent to administer a brief interview. In the end, a total of eight individuals agreed to be interviewed for this project. These individuals were deemed appropriate for interviewing because of their positions and known efforts to work with the South Sudanese community. They were also chosen based on the types of services they claimed to offer this population of refugees. This information was gleaned from basic internet searches, analysis of organization web pages, and via extensive networking. In every case, details of my project were fully explained from the outset and participation was completely voluntary.

Due to the varied locations of participants, it was decided that research materials would
be exchanged via e-mail. Using e-mail meant that the participants could contact me at their convenience and would be available to answer any follow-up questions that emerged from their responses. From there, times were set to conduct phone interviews. The same sets of questions were asked of all participants. From the individual’s responses and narrated experiences with the South Sudanese population, I formed an analysis of themes that emerged from the data.

D. Methods of analysis

Five major themes were identified by closely analyzing the data collected from interviews as well as from data gleaned from organization websites, blogs, and related sources. Themes which emerged from the collected data included the following: (1) an emphasis within South Sudanese culture on the importance of social support and religiosity or faith which have significantly contributed to South Sudanese women’s abilities to survive violence and cope in its aftermath, (2) a dangerous lack of psychosocial services made available to traumatized refugees entirely across the board, (3) a push by humanitarian and human rights organizations to utilize education to make an impact in South Sudanese communities affected by armed conflict and humanitarian crises as well as within the diaspora, (4) an imagined preference for self-identifying with the “survivor” label as opposed to the “victim” label among South Sudanese women by interviewees, and (5) a perception among interviewees that the resilience framework that has become increasingly popular among human rights and social justice workers is largely a Western construct which fails to make measurable impacts in South Sudanese people’s lives.

E. Ethical considerations and limitations

The research plan did not involve conducting interviews with traumatized South Sudanese refugee women directly. As such, risk to vulnerable populations was minimal, if not nonexistent. Interviewing people who have worked with South Sudanese women involved
asking them basic questions about their organizations and about experiences they have had on the job. In spite of the limited risk posed to participants, I was cleared to perform research with human subjects and this research was approved by Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Columbia University. Two of the eight individuals who were interviewed for this thesis happened to be South Sudanese women currently living and working in the United States, although they were interviewed because they occupied important roles in terms of providing services to their local South Sudanese communities. One of the women revealed to me that she had not been a victim of violence herself and that she had only heard experiences from other women in the past. For this reason, I did not feel she was at risk of being traumatized by any questions I asked. The other South Sudanese woman did not reveal whether she was a survivor of violence and I did not veer into personal territory when conducting the interview so that I could ensure risk was minimized.

There were some limitations of this research. For example, because the number of participants was small, it is impossible to make any generalizations about the resiliency of South Sudanese women or how U.S.-based organizations may or may not impact the identities of refugee women who have experienced conflict-related gender-based violence. In any case, the aim of this research was not to make broad, sweeping generalizations; the goal was to take an in-depth look at how South Sudanese refugee women have survived traumatic experiences during one of the most horrific conflicts of our time. Efforts were made to question the usefulness of the resilience framework previously mentioned and to speak to actual people working in this field. Attempts were also made to explore the possible connection between survivorship, victimhood, and resiliency among diasporic South Sudanese women.

Another glaring limitation was the extremely tense political climate within which I was
attempting to conduct interviews. The January 27th, 2017 Executive Order (13769), “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” purported to aid in the crackdown against terrorism, will undeniably be remembered as a hallmark of the Trump Administration. According to the Order, “Numerous foreign-born individuals have been convicted or implicated in terrorism-related crimes since September 11, 2001, including foreign nationals who entered the United States after receiving visitor, student, or employment visas, or who entered through the United States refugee resettlement program” (The White House Office of the Press Secretary January 27, 2017). Under this order, all refugees are prohibited from entering the United States for the next four months. It also enables the United States government to refuse all Syrian refugees for the foreseeable future. Further, the Executive Order specifically bars all people from seven Muslim-majority countries for the next three months (American Psychological Association 2017). These countries include: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and Sudan (Shear & Cooper 2017). The Trump Administration is known for its firm stance against refugee resettlement, especially in regards to assisting Muslim refugees or refugees profiled as Muslim simply based on their place of birth. Policies pushed by the Trump team also severely impact the immigrant community across the United States.

Resistance to the ban on Muslim refugees has been widespread among United States citizens, with United States courts even raising major concerns about the inhumanity of Trump’s decisions. In fact, disagreement of court judges has actually resulted in tremendous pushback which led to a forced revision of the Order (Shetty 2017). On March 6th, 2017, the Trump Administration released a revised version of the first executive order (The White House Office of the Press Secretary March 6, 2017). In this revised order, Iraq was dropped from the list of banned countries. Still, individuals and organizations condemn the Order and the message it
sent to refugees. Currently, this order is enjoined and is not yet in force, although it has already left a significant mark on the refugee community.

Speaking about the first version of the ban, the President of the American Psychological Association, Antonio E. Puente, PhD, stated that, “‘Denying them [refugees] entry to the United States, particularly those who have already been vetted, is inhumane and likely to worsen their suffering. This conclusion is based on extensive research and clinical experience, as well as my own personal past’” (American Psychological Association 2017). Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, among others, have made statements of disapproval, with Amnesty International’s Secretary General Salil Shetty pointing out that the revised ban is no more acceptable than the first. According to Shetty, “Thinly disguised as a national security measure, the ban reinstates many of the most repellent elements of the original” (Shetty 2017). Clearly, the actions of the Trump Administration have sent a chill down the spines of those adamantly concerned with human rights and refugee resettlement.

It is for these specific reasons I believe I had such difficulty finding participants to be interviewed on these subjects. Various staff at many of the organizations I contacted confided to me that they had received threats regarding their work with refugees over the phone and that they have had to increase screening measures to stop potentially dangerous individuals from attempting to gain intelligence on specific refugees and their communities by way of disguising themselves as media. This is, in large part, the reason I elected to gather participants using word-of-mouth and networking, so that those I spoke with would know the true intention of my work. I wanted to maintain transparency at all costs, especially in light of the very confusing and corrosive political climate we are currently dealing with in this country.

4.4 Findings
A. Emphasis on social support & religiosity in South Sudanese culture

While many organizations with refugee-related programming attempt to incorporate social opportunities, such as Jesuit Refugee Service/USA who aim to integrate building and strengthening of social ties within their psychosocial and education programs, it is important to recognize the agency of the refugees themselves. The individuals I interviewed often brought to my attention the South Sudanese value of social support and the possibility of that value translating into a key coping skill for many South Sudanese refugees. Further, it is likely that the importance South Sudanese culture places on individuals maintaining a deep connection to the village has been a great coping mechanism for them. Being together with their people brings many South Sudanese refugees great comfort. For example, Barbara English, co-founder and executive director of Living Ubuntu, a California-based non-profit organization focused on promoting trauma recovery around the globe, described an experience she had while conducting a group session in which an elderly South Sudanese woman received bad news via a phone call (English 2007). The refugee woman’s cell phone rang in the middle of the session and she was informed that her grandson had been killed in South Sudan. English next observed that the other South Sudanese women in the group instinctively knew how to construct a solid support system for one of their own, quickly gathering around the elderly woman, forming a ring of comfort while the woman took to her knees in prayer. According to English, the South Sudanese women in the group knew “a drill of how to emotionally take care” of one another.

Many interviewees reported that social connection and social support are major tools used by South Sudanese people to cope with trauma as well as just to navigate life in general; therefore, interpersonal connection is highly important to this community. This value of social bonding influences many aspects of how South Sudanese women reconstruct their lives outside
of their country. Due to the South Sudanese communal culture, it is not uncommon for South Sudanese refugees to travel in groups. I was informed that this practice even extends to doctor’s appointments, where a South Sudanese woman may bring a number of other South Sudanese people with her to the office. An interviewee explained to me that not only is South Sudanese culture a highly communal one, but that during times of conflict, it only makes sense that South Sudanese people would stay together to guard against acts of violence.

Interviewees reported family as a top priority for South Sudanese women. In South Sudan, the women commonly took care of their own children as well as extended family members. Multiple interviewees told me that South Sudanese women take great pride in taking good care of their children and that these women endure whatever they must in order to keep their children safe and fed. The familial values of South Sudanese women cannot be taken from them; in fact, in many cases, it is entirely for the well-being of their children that refugee women from South Sudan have made the dangerous trek to neighboring countries, managed to get resettled in the United States, and have successfully rebuilt their lives.

Religiosity is the other major South Sudanese value relayed to me by interviewees. Anita Henderlight, Director of Africa ELI, an international non-governmental organization attempting to provide accessible, quality education to girls in South Sudan, commented on the Christian values of the South Sudanese people. She reported that South Sudanese culture places an emphasis on faith and that South Sudanese people are known to pray a great deal. Henderlight suggests that South Sudanese people find great comfort in prayer and look to their God for hope throughout their lives.

Interestingly, more than half of the individuals (five out of eight) interviewed for this project had ties to the Christian church, whether the church was the place from which they
conducted services with South Sudanese women or their services operated using a Christian system of values. As previously stated, South Sudanese people have strong ties to the church because of the importance they place on faith. Once I begun to understand this, I reached out to those in that community in hopes of finding more people with experience helping this community of refugees in the United States. After conducting interviews, it became clear to me that South Sudanese women rely on their Christian faith to give them hope for a better tomorrow for themselves and their children.

It should be stated that, although the South Sudanese values of caretaking for family members and faith in the Christian Church are highly patriarchal, South Sudanese women embrace those values as part of their support structure. The patriarchal culture of violence, whether during peace or conflict, is not one that is accepted by South Sudanese women. Instead, patriarchal violence is seen as a destroyer of the aforementioned “better tomorrow.” It is the violence that kills their husbands and takes their children from them. As such, it is necessary to consider the ways South Sudanese women interpret the various patriarchal structures that affect them.

B. Glaring lack of psychosocial services for traumatized refugees

Following interviews, a few interesting trends emerged from the data. First, a majority of psychosocial services provided to South Sudanese refugees elected to take a community-based approach. Clinical psychologist Susan Montgomery has experience working with traumatized South Sudanese people still based in the country. Montgomery helped bring a modified version of Eastern Mennonite University’s (EMU) Strategies for Trauma Awareness & Resilience (STAR) program to South Sudan, where she first went in 2010 on a mission trip with the United Methodist Church. EMU’s STAR program provides training via workshops, activities, and
lectures to individuals who will, ideally, carry their newfound knowledge out into their communities (Eastern Mennonite University n.d.). Some individuals train with the STAR program for personal benefit, while others participate on behalf of their organization to improve services to their communities. In South Sudan, there are approximately nine sites that are visited by STAR trainers. The trainers run a program called Village STAR, in which they teach for five days in each location, covering topics such as causes and symbols of trauma. This approach is community-based because it aims to engage the entire community in trauma education.

The wife of a South Sudanese pastor and co-founder of a small organization that aids South Sudanese refugees resettling in the United States described multiple community-based approaches. As per her request, she will remain anonymous in this thesis. In respecting her wish to protect her privacy, I have assigned her the pseudonym “Gloria.” Gloria told me about the organization she and her husband founded in the United States and its mission to make it easier for South Sudanese refugees resettling in the United States to find services as well as offering comfort through community prayer. Gloria also described monthly meetings she held with other South Sudanese refugee women, adding that holiday events held by the church also provided comfort to the women. These kinds of services, those that attempt to work together with the South Sudanese value of building and maintaining social ties, are much more effective than services that might reach out to specific individuals. If South Sudanese refugee women can be reached out to as a community of women with shared background and experiences, perhaps more South Sudanese refugee women would be in contact with services they desire most.

A second trend which emerged from the data was the need for more psychosocial services that take a somatic approach with South Sudanese refugee women. In South Sudanese culture, the stigma against mental illness, including psychological effects of trauma, is so strong
that individuals can be written off as “crazy” and marginalized by their communities. This social stigma, therefore, has greatly impacted how South Sudanese people experience symptoms of mental illness. Many of the individuals interviewed for this thesis commented on this issue and described their experiences with trying to assess the mental health needs of this community. English (mentioned earlier) relayed to me that, in her experience, it was much more common for South Sudanese refugee women to bring up more concrete needs, such as needing help with a physical pain, than to discuss anything psychological. English recognizes that trauma is a body-centered experience; she told me that, in more physically-demanding cultures (such as South Sudanese culture), trauma can be worsened by inactivity and, therefore, that movement should be a fully integrated component of trauma recovery.

Overall, it has clearly emerged from the data that community-based, somatic-focused approaches to psychosocial services are most effective with the South Sudanese community. But what was most glaring to me may not be readily recognized by those reading the research findings. It is as important, if not more important, to look for what is not there as it is to look for what has clearly emerged from data. By this, I mean that, sometimes, the most significant findings are based on a realization of what piece of the puzzle has gone missing. The eight individuals I had the honor of interviewing described services they had found most helpful in their work with South Sudanese refugee women; this information has shed light on what kinds of services should be incorporated into any program that seeks to make a difference in a South Sudanese person’s life post-conflict. But what cannot be surmised from the data is the glaring lack of psychosocial services provided to traumatized refugees in general and the isolation South Sudanese refugee women specifically seem to have to combat in the United States.

For this thesis, I made contact with well over 90 organizations. Nearly all organizations I
contacted could not connect me to individuals with experience in this area. Some organizations never seemed available to answer my calls, while others had listed numbers that were no longer active. Some organizations told me that, while they aided refugees with the resettlement process, they provided absolutely no direct services and that trauma services were completely out of their scope. I often asked where traumatized refugees were referred for further assistance in this area and, once I followed up with those places, I was told that none of their clients were South Sudanese. If I did reach a resettlement organization that provided any psychosocial services to refugees, they usually reported that they also had no experience working with South Sudanese refugees. Even places that catered to East African refugees somehow had only limited, if any, contact with this population. When I spoke with those who confirmed that they were involved with the South Sudanese refugee population, it was much more likely that they had experience speaking with South Sudanese men over women, due to rigid gender norms and customs.

Each layer of difficulty I encountered while conducting my research revealed to me humble glimpses of what must be the very harsh realities of life as a South Sudanese refugee woman. How can it be that during a time when so many South Sudanese people have been forced out of their homeland, while the United States claims to make peace-building in South Sudan a priority, when South Sudan is undergoing major humanitarian and human rights crises, South Sudanese refugees are invisible? How can it be that organizations that claim to care so deeply about the resettlement process don’t acknowledge as common sense the fact that so many of the refugees it aids are traumatized and are in need of services to address that trauma? Why is it that, in the cycle of refugee services, the psychosocial component seems to have been completely dropped out from the bottom? One individual I interviewed who requested to remain anonymous expressed to me that it is necessary “to make emotional support a natural, normal, respected part
of the resettlement process” no matter where that resettlement is taking place. She stressed that
this kind of support must be normalized for refugees to be successfully resettled.

The inclusion of emotional support for refugees engaged in the resettlement process
would seem to be a logical pathway to building the kind of resilience humanitarian and human
rights workers aim to foster among the refugees they work with. Various researchers have noted
the value of social support, which is intertwined with emotional support, for enhancing resiliency
of traumatized individuals. For example, Hébert, Lavoie, and Blais studied the effect of social
support on Canadian adolescents who had experienced sexual abuse and found that, “…high
perceived maternal support as well as peer support, were found to be associated with a decrease
likelihood of presenting PTSD symptoms reaching clinical levels in sexually abused teenagers”
(2014: 690). Panagioti et al. researched the effect of social support on suicidal behavior among
British sufferers of PTSD and found that, “…perceived social support might confer resilience to
individuals with PTSD and counter the development of suicidal thoughts and behaviors” (2014:
104). Simply put, it is possible that “…human social experience has a particularly salient if not
central role in the way an individual responds to trauma” (Charuvastra and Cloitre 2008: 303). If,
then, research has shown that, in Western contexts, traumatized individuals fare better when they
feel supported, why does this aspect of resiliency-building not extend to non-Western peoples? If
organizations that work with refugees hope to foster resiliency in order to alleviate post-
traumatic stress symptoms, why does emotional (social) support seem to be last on the list of
available resources? This begs the question of what kinds of resiliency are deemed most
appropriate for non-Western individuals. It appears that only certain aspects of the Western
resilience framework are applied by humanitarian and human rights workers.

C. Pushing education for impact
Many interviewees expressed the connection between education and building resiliency among refugees. Not surprisingly, this link to resiliency also pointed to an investment in peace. Jesuit Refugee Service/USA, Africa ELI, and many other organizations hold education as a main value because it is simply a fact that a population that is well-educated performs better on all accounts. Gloria, the interviewee previously discussed, informed me that, for South Sudanese women, education is a major concern. Yet, it is a concern for reasons that are far more complex than meet the eye. According to Gloria, it is very common for South Sudanese refugee women to encourage their children to obtain the very best education they are able so that, one day, they might choose to return to South Sudan to make a difference for future generations. Education is viewed as a viable tool with which South Sudanese people can rebuild their nation so that they may one day live there in peace. Henderlight (Africa ELI) made the following statement regarding her organization’s value of education: “What we’re really doing is educating the next generation that hasn’t been born yet.” By this, Henderlight is describing how educating tomorrow’s parents, who will pass what they value on to the next generation, can make a major impact.

Where education meant training South Sudanese people on trauma or even fostering awareness of the situation in South Sudan abroad as part of advocacy, the sentiment was the same. Teaching South Sudanese people how to combat the effects of trauma and spreading global awareness of the crises in South Sudan are two tactics that may be seen as pathways to peace for South Sudan. Although the brands of education may differ, it seems those working to push education are doing so because they believe it will have a significant impact on the future of South Sudan.

D. Imagined preference for self-identifying as “survivor”
Giulia McPherson, Director of Advocacy & Operations at Jesuit Refugee Service/USA, surmised that refugee women most likely see themselves as survivors because their stories are not unique among their peers. McPherson explains that the fact that so many refugee women have endured similar injustices makes it difficult for them to identify themselves as victims. Self-identifying as “victim” requires that one be able to single oneself out, to identify that the trauma they endured was out of the ordinary. This is not possible for women for whom the majority of women in their lives have most likely been victimized themselves. English (Living Ubuntu) also rejected the idea that South Sudanese refugee women would likely identify as victims, noting that they are well aware of the strength they have within themselves. Henderlight (Africa ELI) relayed this question to her colleagues during a meeting and the group shared the belief that South Sudanese women would prefer the term “survivor” to describe themselves. According to the anonymous interviewee from Samaritas, “more than any other [group of refugees], [the South Sudanese women] tend to not embrace the term ‘victim.’” Montgomery (clinical psychologist) believes that, for this population of women, “to be a victim is a little bit of a luxury.” According to the English tutor at Green Meadow United Methodist Church in Tennessee, the South Sudanese women she has encountered have reflected a sense of survivorship, carrying themselves as “strong women” who support each other by forming a community. Finally, Gloria reported that South Sudanese women are survivors because some have had to walk for days just to reach safety and, once they arrive in refugee camps, they often face discrimination. In other words, the trials they have faced, though seemingly insurmountable, have somehow not succeeded in keeping them down or defeating them.

Often described as “strong women” and applauded for their active work toward bettering their lives post-conflict, South Sudanese women may be understood as “survivors” rather than
“victims” by those in the West. Yet, I was often told that these terms were most likely foreign to South Sudanese women themselves due to being sheltered from certain terminology popularized in the West. They may be more likely and just as happy to call themselves “strong women.” It is certainly possible that neither “survivor” nor “victim” has emerged as a useful social identity among South Sudanese people. The resilience framework may advocate for the “survivor” identity, but if this identity is of no use to South Sudanese women within the context of their own societies, I question the work this framework is actually doing. Under the premises of the Western resilience framework, resiliency and survivorship go hand-in-hand. Performing resiliency allows women access to the “survivor” identity, but this identity is not one that is easily translated to non-Western contexts, as in the case of South Sudanese women.

E. Interviewees’ perception of the resilience framework as futile

It was the general consensus among those interviewed for this thesis that there is a gap between the effects of the resilience framework and what it actually seeks to accomplish. The term “resilience” is one that emerged wholly through a Western lens; that is, the word is an entirely Western construct. “Resilience” has morphed into a sort of Western buzzword, and it is one that has been transplanted into non-Western contexts without much thought. This process has been incredibly problematic. For example, Montgomery (clinical psychologist) divulged to me that the Western concept of practicing “self-care” is one of the most difficult concepts to translate to the South Sudanese individuals who participate in her programming. She even questioned whether resilience-building activities have truly been helpful. The failure to translate concepts like this only serves to confuse traumatized individuals and does not offer concrete support to them in their time of need.

English (Living Ubuntu) vocalized to me the very conundrum I had already been turning
over in my mind for months: the notion of resiliency may very well be an important one, yet the language of its framework, the language of psychotherapy and human rights, may only be one of the “catchphrases of our time.” Henderlight (Africa ELI) agreed that “resilience” is more of a “Western buzzword” than anything else. She asks, “How do you capture a picture of something you’ve never seen?” Henderlight explained to me that South Sudanese people have never seen peace in their country and that, as a result, a picture of better times would not be something they could easily envision in their minds. Better times would simply be something foreign to them. Resiliency requires the ability to bounce back from a setback, yet it is impossible for someone to view themselves as resilient when they’ve never had something better to bounce back to. While Henderlight acknowledges that the resilience framework may give South Sudanese women a “boost” in the short-term, she fears that the circumstances in South Sudan change too rapidly for the framework to be effective or sustainable in the long-term. In fact, she worries that a system like this could possibly “create dependency.” The interviewee from Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service expanded upon this idea, noting that if South Sudanese people are expected to accept support from outsiders, the resilience framework’s effectiveness is extremely questionable. Any conceptualization of resilience that requires the acceptance of outside support is not a sincere one. Encouraging non-Western people to meet the needs of their own communities is not the problem; the problem is the use of a resilience framework by humanitarians and others that doesn’t view self-sufficiency as an essential key to the resiliency of communities. If non-Western people are introduced to the Western resilience framework only by way of insistent Westerners and to be resilient to trauma, non-Western people must be educated using Western notions of resiliency, then becoming resilient is a process that always relies on whoever is a Western authority on trauma and other related forms of knowledge.
The interviewee from Samaritas made a critical observation: the measurements we use in the West to measure resilience are simply non-existent for the people we try to apply them to (i.e. South Sudanese refugee women). In the West, resilience has been measured by assessing one’s ability to form social ties, the ability to remain hopeful, and the ability to solve problems as they arise (Madsen and Abell 2010: 225). There may be nothing wrong with measuring resilience in this way, but Western notions of social support, optimism, and how to go about solving one’s problems may not always match up with non-Western notions of those components. For example, when South Sudanese women report that they are strong, in what ways do they mean and what kind of strength is most important to them? Many times, personal internal strength is, effectively, “lost in translation” and to force Western terminology upon non-Western peoples is unjust.

The interviewee from Samaritas suggested that, although we may be using our terms, we have no real understanding of what we are actually measuring. Montgomery (clinical psychologist) bluntly admitted to me that, “we really don’t know” if the resilience framework is effective or not. She explained that Westerners could easily miss the signs of resilience as a specific culture expresses them simply because we do not express them in the same manner, noting, for example, “physical signs of resilience” that Westerners do not commonly assess. Using Western language in contexts in which it simply does not apply is futile. For example, Westerners generally do not identify connectedness to one’s community as a major strength that aids resiliency; in the South Sudanese context and among South Sudanese refugees, connectedness may very well be a major force to be reckoned with. Interviewees recognized the importance of connectedness in the contexts within which they worked, but it seems that the resilience framework they had been trained to utilize has been influenced by the people they
actually serve on the ground; perhaps this is why interviewees were ambivalent about the utility of the resilience framework.

South Sudanese refugee women have been described to me time and time again as “brave,” “courageous,” and “strong.” I don’t believe anyone who knew their stories would say that they weren’t resilient people. That being said, programming and measurements of the resilient framework simply do not translate to the South Sudanese context. There is a difference between resilience as a concept and the way that concept is employed. Each individual interviewed for this thesis reported to me that they had not heard South Sudanese women refer to themselves as “resilient.” Instead, this term was utilized by an outsider to refer to South Sudanese women they hoped to bring services to. While referring to someone as “resilient” seems harmless, even gives off an air of respect and reverence for that person, discourse is known to have consequences where it is employed. This is especially true when that discourse is being utilized by privileged people to refer to people who lack privilege. As a concept created by and utilized in the West, the resilience framework has become a dominant tool used to understand trauma and its effects. Sometimes we overestimate the translatability of this tool.

4.5 Discussion

The findings of this research reveal possible aspects of South Sudanese culture that may contribute to the inner strength of South Sudanese refugee women, including the value the culture places on social connectedness and support as well as faith and religiosity. They reveal a lack of psychosocial services being provided to the refugee community, but a solid belief in education as a pathway to peace in South Sudan, locally and within the diaspora. The findings reveal South Sudanese refugee women’s disconnection to the “victim” identity and suggest the higher probability with which they might engage in survivorship. All of these findings led up to
the most important conclusion of this thesis; the main objective of this thesis was to gain a better understanding of whether the resilience framework is a useful and/or reliable one for the non-Western context within which it was employed.

While some of the individuals interviewed for this thesis explained to me that their particular websites or group of colleagues did not use the term “resilient,” they often described services that aimed to foster resiliency among South Sudanese women. Others did use the term “resilient” in referring to the refugees they provided services to and acknowledged that they had used similar terminology in discussions with donors. Each interviewee easily recognized the resilience framework I inquired about as one that is often utilized in their line of work. At the same time, they all seemed ambivalent about the efficacy of such a framework in the contexts within which they were working. I was told that that ambivalence is largely a product of a failure of the interviewees’ Western training to line up with the demands they encounter in their work in non-Western contexts.

Chapter 5: Concluding Thoughts

5.1 International Accountability

Not only does the international community have an obligation to hold those committing war crimes in South Sudan accountable for their actions, it is also obligated to take responsibility for the various parts it played in the creation of such war and destruction. South Sudan could not have been established without the assistance of other already-established nations. According to David Smith, “Sculpting a new nation state was the work of many hands but if there was a Pygmalion, it was the United States, the prime sponsor of a referendum for secession, in which 99% voted yes, and the donor of billions of dollars in aid” (Smith 2014). Smith goes on to suggest that the United States may have been motivated to assert itself in the affairs of South
Sudan because of South Sudan's resources: namely, its massive oil reserves. He even goes as far as to remind readers that “…the Arab-led regime in Sudan had once harboured [sic] Osama bin Laden.” These factors are not minor and they certainly fall in line with what can be expected from the U.S. agenda.

“…Critics see it as an example of blundering American imperialism, a state-building exercise as doomed as those in Afghanistan and Iraq. They claim the US and the unwieldy coalition of international partners who midwifed South Sudan into existence focused too much on ‘technical fixes’ – building infrastructure and delivering services – while neglecting good governance, evenly distributing resources and reconciliation among what the International Crisis Group described in 2010 as ‘a web of deep-rooted ethnic tensions’” (Smith 2014).

It is not surprising that, during its imperialist planning, the United States miscalculated the weight and complexity of the conflict in South Sudan. Perhaps, in retrospect, “America is feeling buyer's remorse.” It is questionable whether the United States has the same power to sway leadership in South Sudan that it did before it pushed for the referendum, but if there is one major player in the international community with a fighting chance, it would be the United States.

Overall, the international community as a whole has a responsibility to the people of South Sudan. Peace negotiations must continue to be supported and media reporting must not turn away from the crisis. Instead, the human cost of such warring should remain front and center so that the real consequences affecting all South Sudanese citizens and even those in the diaspora are not forgotten.

5.2 Disconnect Between the Language of Helping and Concrete Impact: the Danger of a “Buzzword”

The modern resilience framework developed from a psychological and psychiatric standpoint that sought to better understand what allowed traumatized people to recover and
ultimately thrive in their lives. “Resilience” and other language associated with the helping professions often comes from a place of understanding and then, like the aforementioned framework, from a place of support. Yet this discourse is not without its flaws and, as previously discussed, does not easily translate to all of the contexts we might like it to. The danger of this discourse is largely that it risks holding the affected individual responsible for healing, thriving, and sometimes even for going above and beyond to help others who have suffered similar injustices, all while making invisible the larger systems and structures that have enabled those injustices and perpetuated suffering in the first place. While it is not always the case that individuals bear the brunt of the responsibility to help themselves so that larger systems and structures may remain left untouched, this is far too often the case. Much of the time, it is individuals who pay the price for circumstances that are produced by the affairs of outside structures and institutions they have limited control over.

The resilience framework and its associated discourse also seem to be removed from their intention to help make people and their communities stronger and more durable in the face of trauma. The actual, concrete impact of this framework appears to leave many individuals and organizations empty-handed, having no real results to show regarding impact and change. As interviewees for this thesis regrettably admitted, any positive effects the resilience framework has on their work have yet to be seen. While there may very well be certain situations and contexts in which the framework does have its benefits, non-Western, humanitarian-focused contexts seem not to be one of those appropriate circumstances.

“Resilience” and similar terms used in humanitarian work risk being boiled down to nothing more than Western “buzzwords,” terms to be thrown around in board rooms where the focus is on enticing donors to step up and contribute to various humanitarian causes.
“Resilience” becomes a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it is an ambiguous assessment tool capable of generating funding if played right, but on the other, it is reserved for Western people’s amazement at the ways in which non-Western people continue to get up with the sun after yet another night of bloodshed and terror, as if they have any choice at all.

5.3 The Danger of Ethnocentrism: Resilience Framework Misses the Mark

The resilience framework is one that was formed in the West, first used in the West, and has been used by Western people in non-Western contexts. It is problematic to utilize this framework in efforts to further the development of other nations for these reasons, but it is just as problematic to rely on this framework in working with individuals and communities in these underdeveloped nations. Culture matters; it is understandable that there are culturally-specific resilience tactics. For example, in the South Sudanese context, reliance on community and social ties is not only welcomed, but is expected. This reliance includes not only an obligation of one’s community to know about and have influence over one’s affairs, but for one to reach out and take responsibility for others in their community. Social ties are social relationships and bonds that are usually unbreakable. Yet this reliance and emphasis on community is often considered to be meddlesome in the West. In the United States, the hegemonic culture (largely White, patriarchal, and heterosexual) prefers that people be socialized to lead mostly private lives of which they are supposed to be completely in control. Although it is true that many different cultures co-exist in the United States and United States culture cannot be generalized, there is a dominant culture that marginalizes other cultural ideals. This dominant culture is often at odds with the value of doing what is best for the whole of one’s community and instead favors the practice of doing what is best for the individual. The differences between collectivist and individualistic cultures have long been explored by social scientists (i.e. Triandis
et al.). One culture’s strength is another’s weakness. Those who work with refugee populations, like the individuals interviewed for this thesis, have a solid understanding of this and often embrace cultural differences in order to develop a rapport with refugees so that they can assist refugees in making smoother transitions to new cultural environments.

The latent assumption often held by humanitarian and human rights workers and those in the fields of psychology and psychiatry that resilience means the same thing to a South Sudanese person as it does to an American is not only ethnocentric, but may also be dangerous due to power differentials. Western people occupy the position of privilege and when we insert ourselves, our politics, our expectations, and our institutions (and even humanitarian aid is an institution) into contexts we are not familiar with, non-Western people pay the price. According to Mazzocchi, “the imposition of Western scientific ideas and methods not only causes disruption to existing social and economic relationships, but also might spoil the local knowledge” (2006: 465). The Western resilience framework risks pathologizing and stigmatizing non-Western emotional reactions to trauma (Summerfield 2004: 240). Thus, the resilience framework, although well-meaning, must be assessed for its ability to be culturally-sensitive and, if the framework is determined to be futile in a specific context, it should not be relied upon; its utility must not be taken for granted. While the broader concept of resiliency may very well have merit in today’s increasingly traumatic world, the application of the hegemonic resilience framework to non-Western contexts appears to be erroneous.

5.4 Resilience Framework as a Form of Colonialist Psychoeducation

As previously discussed, the application of Western “psychiatric knowledge” to non-Western contexts often ignores the cultural specificity of that knowledge. Illich’s theory of “cultural iatrogenesis” highlights what he refers to as “cultured health” (1976: 45). In his well-
known book titled *Medical Nemesis: the Expropriation of Health*, Illich writes:

“The ideology promoted by contemporary cosmopolitan medical enterprise … radically undermines the continuation of old cultural programs and prevents the emergence of new ones that would provide a pattern for self-care and suffering. Wherever in the world a culture is medicalized, the traditional framework for habits that can become conscious in the personal practice of the virtue of hygiene is progressively trammeled by a mechanical system, a medical code by which individuals submit to the instructions emanating from hygienic custodians. Medicalization constitutes a prolific bureaucratic program based on the denial of each man's need to deal with pain, sickness, and death. The modern medical enterprise represents an endeavor to do for people what their genetic and cultural heritage formerly equipped them to do for themselves. Medical civilization is planned and organized to kill pain, to eliminate sickness, and to abolish the need for an art of suffering and of dying. This progressive flattening out of personal, virtuous performance constitutes a new goal which has never before been a guideline for social life. Suffering, healing, and dying, which are essentially intransitive activities that culture taught each man, are now claimed by technocracy as new areas of policy-making and are treated as malfunctions from which populations ought to be institutionally relieved. The goals of metropolitan medical civilization are thus in opposition to every single cultural health program they encounter in the process of progressive colonization.”

Globalization of ideas certainly includes the globalization of ideas about psychology and trauma, but when more traditional, indigenous systems of knowledge are tossed aside for those that originated in the West, cultural colonialism is in full effect. Indigenous systems of knowledge may be unintentionally tossed aside by well-meaning humanitarian and human rights workers who fail to take the cultural context into consideration when delivering services to non-Western refugees. The misapplication of Western systems of knowledge to non-Western contexts, however well-meaning, appears to be a new age form of colonization in disguise.

Individuals in every society become distressed; this is a fact of the human experience. But systems of meaning and the human experience of trauma vary immensely. According to Summerfield, “Psychiatric universalism risks being imperialistic, reminding us of the colonial era when what was presented to indigenous peoples was that there were different types of knowledge, and theirs was second-rate” (2004: 238). Many times, imperialism is packaged in the form of education, resulting in efforts to bring knowledge to peoples far and wide that appear to
be rather genuine and well-meaning. Psychoeducation, often a technique of outreach and assistance practiced by human rights and humanitarian organizations that hope to tend to psychological needs in non-Western contexts, is not exempt from this rule. In fact, the clinical psychologist interviewed for this thesis briefly described an approach she has been trained to teach and has continued to teach others in non-Western settings that involves trauma-specific psychoeducation and resilience-building efforts. It is possible that this form of psychoeducation is yet another form of thinly-veiled imperialism.

In their research on the effect of PTSD psychoeducation in the Burundian context, Yeomans et al. found that “…participants randomized to the condition without PTSD psychoeducation saw greater decreases in their traumatic stress symptoms than those randomized to the condition with psychoeducational content” (2010: 310). The authors proposed that Summerfield’s (2004) suspicions could have merit, noting that “…the importation of a PTSD psychoeducation that emphasizes individualistic psychopathology and vulnerability might undermine resilience and lead to greater distress.” Ultimately, the researchers recommended that service providers carefully assess “whether psychoeducational information is couched in a message of recovery or protracted vulnerability” (311). The resilience framework questioned in this thesis is one that uses psychoeducation to transplant Western forms of knowledge about trauma, recovery, and mental wellness to non-Western settings, consequently encouraging non-Western people to conceive of their realities as perpetually traumatic and to believe that their responses to the trauma they endure necessarily portray them in one of only two ways: non-Western individuals can either accept the Western-manufactured identity of one who is “resilient,” or they can assume the tired role of the “vulnerable victim.” Either identity carries with it a slew of Western assumptions and, because those providing help during times of
humanitarian crises are largely operating from a Western standpoint, it would serve us well to remain critical of the concepts and frameworks that influence social justice endeavors in non-Western contexts.
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