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An Exploration of the Meaning-Making Process of Adults Who Were Relationally Bullied in Adolescence: A Narrative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that relational bullying is the most common form of bullying victimisation in the United Kingdom. In addition, it is associated with the widest range of psychosocial difficulties in the short- and long-term compared to other subtypes of bullying. Despite this, relational bullying has received less research attention than other forms of bullying. This research aims to present an in-depth exploration of adults' meaning-making processes associated with their experience of relational bullying victimisation in adolescence, contributing to the significant gap in the research. This research employed a qualitative research design, conducting life story interviews with eight participants. Data were analysed using narrative analysis. Three main superordinate themes were constructed from the data. These themes illuminate a complex nonlinear process of meaning-making, highlight shifts between an agentic and powerless position and point to a lack of contextual narratives to support individuals to make sense of this experience. The findings suggest several key considerations for practitioners working with clients who have experienced relational bullying. These include recognising the potential importance of peer attachment histories, implications for the therapeutic approach and the necessity of addressing broader cultural contexts.

1 | Introduction

1.1 | Relational Bullying Victimisation

Bullying victimisation amongst children and adolescents is a relatively common occurrence worldwide and is recognised as a significant public health problem (Chester et al. 2017). Extensive research has documented the potential impacts of generalised bullying victimisation in all areas of children's lives and has demonstrated that many of these impacts extend into adulthood (see de Lara 2019; Takizawa et al. 2014). Although historically, the study of bullying has been focused on physical, global or generalised nonspecific bullying, the past 25 years has seen a growth in interest in *relational bullying*. Relational bullying victimisation is a distinct form of bullying that involves the systematic

manipulation and erosion of peer relationships, social status and/or sense of belonging (Fanti et al. 2019). Relational bullying can involve rejecting, ignoring, exclusionary, demeaning, belittling, manipulating and controlling behaviours as well as harm or threat of harm to reputation (James et al. 2011). This can include verbal and nonverbal behaviours that include deliberately ignoring and excluding an individual, threatening to retract friendships and spreading rumours (Chester et al. 2017). Within the research literature, the term relational bullying is often used interchangeably with 'indirect,' 'covert' or 'social' bullying (Gomes 2007). Although these terms are not equivalent, there is considerable correlation and overlap between these terms and therefore research employing all of these terms is considered to be potentially relevant (Chester et al. 2017).

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There is relatively limited research reporting the prevalence of relational bullying alone. However, a recent study in the United Kingdom exploring bullying experiences of 12–15 year old adolescents reported a relational victimisation prevalence of 12.03% (Thornton et al. 2024). This is approximately twice the prevalence of physical bullying (6.31%) and cyberbullying (4.57%) (Thornton et al. 2024). In addition, research has found that relational bullying is more common in adolescence, a finding that has been attributed to greater social awareness, a greater concern with social status and increased social sophistication at this age (Archer and Coyne 2005; Voulgaridou and Kokkinos 2015).

1.2 | Relational Bullying in Adolescence

Research has consistently demonstrated that relational bullying is often more damaging and stressful for young people than other forms of bullying, measured through a range of measures, including quality of life scores, depression and self-concept (Chester et al. 2017; Ferraz de Camargo and Rice 2020; Paquette and Underwood 1999). Limited research has explored the potential moderators of relational victimisation outcomes. Mathieson et al.'s (2014) research, for example, found that rumination plays a mediating role in the relationship between relational bullying and depression. They hypothesise that a lack of social support and feelings of shame or embarrassment that victims of relational bullying may experience may leave them to ruminate on their feelings alone. Other research has highlighted the role of misperception and distortion in relational bullying (Ferraz de Camargo and Rice 2020). It is hypothesised that individuals who experience more covert forms of bullying behaviours such as those found in relational bullying experiences may be more vulnerable to misperception and distortion than other forms of bullying. Furthermore, although not conducted exclusively with adolescents but with college students aged 18–23 in the United States, Song et al.'s (2021) research explored the factors that may influence the association between relational bullying victimisation and depressive symptoms. Integrating a narrative and psychophysiological research perspective, this research found that narrative strategies of disengagement and positive resolution in combination with sinus arrhythmia reactivity activation served a protective function. This research highlights the potential role of biological processes and cognitive interpretative processes in shaping the meaning-making process and outcomes of individuals who have experienced relational victimisation. In addition, research exploring attribution processes across bullying subtypes found that relational bullying is associated with higher self-blaming tendencies than in verbal or physical bullying amongst school age children (Chen and Chen 2019). Indeed, it has been suggested that although physical victimisation may enable children to make external attributions, it is possible that other forms of bullying may encourage the use of internal attributions (Ladd and Ladd 2001). This finding is significant since research has shown that processes of self-blame are highly correlated with experiences of shame, depression and social anxiety (Gilbert and Miles 2000).

Furthermore, research has highlighted the potential role of cultural understandings and social support in shaping this experience, underscoring processes of minimisation, normalisation and

trivialisation by adolescents, parents and teachers in regards to the experience of relational bullying (Chester et al. 2023; Kahn et al. 2012; Smorti et al. 2003). Alongside this, research has found that relational bullying is less likely to be defined in school bullying policies in England, and, notably, the UK Government's bullying online definition includes 'physical assault, teasing, making threats, name calling, cyberbullying' but does not explicitly address relational bullying (Schools and Education 2020, para 2; P. Smith et al. 2008). Thus, despite compelling research highlighting the prevalence and damaging nature of relational bullying, this lack of cultural visibility and the misconceptions raised by the research reviewed is perhaps constitutive of the lack of support that victims often feel (Kahn et al. 2012).

1.3 | Retrospective Accounts of Relational Bullying

Although some research has explored the potential long-term impacts of generalised bullying experienced in adolescence, there is relatively limited research exploring the potential long-lasting implications of relational bullying victimisation. The majority of studies exploring the long-term correlates of relational bullying compare the impacts of various different subtypes. Although this research reflects some definitional inconsistencies, it overall indicates that relational bullying is associated with the widest range of long-term psychological difficulties above and beyond that of other subtypes of bullying (C. Brown 2013; Heretick 2014).

To date, there is no peer reviewed qualitative research that explicitly explores adults' accounts of the impact of relational bullying victimisation in childhood. However, a doctoral thesis by T. Brown (2020) which consists of three integrated studies conducted in New Zealand explicitly focuses on relational bullying. The overarching aim of this study was to explore parents' responses to their child's experience of relational bullying. The third study, however, explores parents' own experiences of relational victimisation and perpetration in relation to the context of their own parenting approach. The findings highlight the ongoing impact of relational bullying victimisation, including continued struggles with self-esteem, confidence and self-concept, while also highlighting potential constructive outcomes of the experience, including increased personal strength and the development of agency and control. In relation to the potentially constructive outcomes, T. Brown (2020) highlights the potential process of *posttraumatic growth* which refers to positive psychological changes stemming from traumatic experiences (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Although this thesis importantly contributes to the lack of research exploring the meaning construction processes of adults who experienced relational bullying in adolescence, the reliance on relatively short-answer survey data and the specific focus on parenting contributes to a lack of depth and context, limiting the findings' ability to fully capture the nuances and complexities of individuals' meaning-making processes.

T. Brown's (2020) findings are echoed in retrospective qualitative research exploring generalised bullying, which has evidenced perceived adverse as well as constructive interpretations of victimisation. This is clearly depicted in de Lara's (2019) theoretical model which highlights how the interpretation of

childhood bullying incidents by the victim leads to differing victim responses, including positive consequences, no identifiable consequences and negative consequences, which in turn may shape the individuals' development. This interplay of negative and positive outcomes is also found in research on childhood developmental trauma, and in light of these findings, several researchers have highlighted the potential value of bridging bullying research with the extensive research on trauma experiences (Carlisle and Rofes 2007; Weindl and Lueger-Schuster 2018a). Cour et al. (2022), for example, in comparing generalised bullying victimisation to a trauma, highlight a similar process of disruption in signification processes, resulting in impaired relationship ability, disproportionate negative self-awareness and self-blame.

1.4 | Purpose of the Present Study

The literature reviewed outlines the current status of the research. The majority of the existing research takes a short-term view and prioritises paradigmatic knowing, employing nomothetic quantitative research methods that focus on the cause and effect and fails to explicitly focus on relational bullying. An in-depth contextualised approach to exploring the subjective and intersubjective meanings of the experience of relational bullying victimisation is particularly important, given the purported relational complexity of this behaviour and the potential relevance of cultural frames of understanding.

In response to the research outlined, this study sought to address two questions: firstly, how do adults understand and make sense of their experience of being relationally bullied in adolescence, and secondly, how are narratives constructed and employed in adults' accounts of being relationally bullied in adolescence? This research seeks to offer an in-depth exploration of how adults understand themselves and their relationships in the context of this experience. It aims to enrich psychological practitioners' knowledge of how this experience may contribute to developmental outcomes across the lifespan and how it may shape relational patterns and self-perceptions in adulthood. The lifespan developmental perspective and relational emphasis of this research is particularly aligned with Counselling Psychology's humanist, contextualised and holistic approach that emphasises the embedded lived experience of human beings within a relational matrix of intersubjective meaning (Manafi 2010). In addition, this subject is aligned with Counselling Psychology's commitment to social justice and further research presents an opportunity to direct attention to a common and distressing experience that involves an imbalance of power (Douglas et al. 2016). This is particularly important given the assumptions of this behaviour as normative and the lack of support experienced by many victims.

2 | Method

2.1 | Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research method to explore the narratives of eight adult individuals who experienced relational bullying in adolescence. Narrative analysis was chosen due to its principal concern with meaning-making across time (B. Smith 2016). In alignment with the adopted epistemology contextual constructionism, narrative analysis allows

this research to engage with participants' experiential situated reality as well as the contextualised linguistic and discursive aspects of participants' accounts (Riessman 1993; B. Smith 2016). This research adopted Yardley's (2000) four broad principles to guide the trustworthiness of this research. Ethical approval was received from the respective university ethics committee.

2.2 | Participants

The participants were purposively sampled and recruited via a range of UK charities and online forums that provide support and education about bullying. The inclusion criteria were adults who had a personal experience of being relationally bullied between the ages of ten and eighteen by peers. This age range was chosen due to the intensified prevalence of relational bullying at this age (Archer and Coyne 2005). The exclusion criteria included individuals younger than 18 and those who expressed concern that participation would result in significant distress. A total of eight participants were recruited to take part in the research. All participants reported experiencing relational bullying by peers in the school environment during their adolescence in the United Kingdom, United States of America or Ireland. The participants' ages ranged between 24 and 60. See Table 1 below. All participants gave informed consent to participate in the research. All identity and contact details provided by participants were treated confidentially and data including recordings were stored securely according to the Data and Protection Act (2018). Pseudonyms have been used throughout the research process.

2.3 | Procedure for Data Collection

In-depth unstructured audio-recorded narrative life-story interviews were conducted in order to gather rich and detailed accounts from participants about their experiences. Interviews took place online lasting approximately 1.5 h. During the interview, socio-demographic information was collected and information about their experience of relational bullying was obtained.

2.4 | Analytical Steps

Data were transcribed verbatim. The analytical approach sought to address both research questions which sought to provide an in-depth and holistic understanding of meaning construction through interpretations of narrative content and function. The analysis embraced an inductive exploratory approach and acknowledged the role of the researcher in the co-construction of the data. Responses to the data were recorded in a reflexive research diary which encouraged a dialogue between the researcher's fore-conceptions, emotional responses and new understandings, paying particular attention to the sociocultural context of the participant and the researcher (Etherington 2004). The researcher was sensitive to the ways in which narrative meaning is co-constructed in a particular moment in time and for a particular audience (Riessman 1993). A reflexive extract exploring the analytical process is included in Supporting Information S1: Appendix A.

The analysis process was formed of four steps. The first step involved re-reading and familiarisation with the data. Drawings of each participants' narrative were made in order to establish a

TABLE 1 | Demographic table of participants.

Participant name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Work status	Age experienced relational bullying	Country in which participant experienced relational bullying
Fiona	30	Female	White British	Employed	11–15	UK
Clare	24	Female	White British	Employed	11–18	UK
Kim	36	Female	White British	Employed	11–13	UK
Anna	34	Female	Asian, Hong Kong	Student	14–18	UK
Luke	47	Male	White Irish	Student	7–17	Ireland
David	25	Male	White British	Employed	15–18	UK
Charles	60	Male	White Caucasian US	Employed	12–14	USA
Miles	53	Male	White Caucasian US	Employed	10–16	USA

visual map of each narrative (see Supporting Information S1: Appendix B). Step two involved applying a range of interpretative perspectives to the narrative. This included the analysis of the content, function and structure of the narratives and the interactions between these narrative elements. Step three involved the application of a reflexive perspective. Finally, step four involved organising themes into superordinate and subordinate themes alongside excerpts from participants' narratives. This process was guided by a range of questions which can be found in Supporting Information S1: Appendix C.

3 | Findings

The re-telling of narratives presented below is divided into three superordinate themes, *uncertainty in the meaning-making process: the unstable framing of victimhood; narrative strategies of survival; and narratives of recovery: both/and*. These superordinate themes narrate a general movement towards greater narrative agency and stability. However, a common thread of narrative uncertainty and ambiguity, reflecting sustained internal conflict and the continued negotiation of agency, is consistent throughout and projected into the future as participants navigate shifts between an agentic and a powerless position. See Table 2 for an overview of superordinate and subordinate themes.

3.1 | Superordinate Theme 1: Uncertainty in the Meaning-Making Process: The Unstable Framing of Victimhood

This superordinate theme is divided into two subordinate themes which explore how a dominant sense of uncertainty in the participants' narratives results in different framings of victimhood. The movement between victim positions highlights participants' lack of agency and narrative control while also reinforcing a sense of uncertainty.

3.1.1 | Narrative Confusion

A sense of confusion was introduced into the majority of participants' narratives through the positioning of themselves as

young children before they experienced relational bullying. For example, Clare, a 24-year-old woman who recalled experiencing relational bullying in a UK school aged 11–18, described herself as a child as *'happy go lucky'*, explaining that before experiencing relational bullying victimisation, she felt that the *'world's my oyster'*, emphasising a sense of uncorrupted innocence and expectation of the world. This positioning of Clare's younger self as innocent and naïve was reflected in several of the participants opening narratives and highlights the bewildering shock and confusion experienced while also pointing to the sudden juncture from an innocent and trusting attitude. In positioning their younger selves as naïve, innocent and nonagentic, participants are framed as *'ideal'* victims, a position that highlights the participants' vulnerability, elicits empathy and evokes a sense of injustice. In reflecting on past innocence, these narratives subtly foreshadow the impact of the events to come.

In addition, a sense of ongoing confusion is demonstrated by participants repeated use of questions regarding the *'cause'* of this behaviour. Rhetorical questions of *'why'* are interspersed through the majority of participants' narratives, often interrupting and fragmenting the narrative, further contributing to a sense of confusion and a lack of narrative coherence. For example, Anna a 34-year-old woman who recalled experiencing relational bullying in a school in the United Kingdom aged 14 to 18 asks *'Why? Why is it like that? Why did they have to be so quiet when they talk to me? Why do they have to hide when they talk to me?'* Through the use of these seemingly insoluble questions, participants question their own culpability in this experience while also expressing their acute bewilderment and incomprehension. This emphasises the emotional impact of this experience while also demonstrating Anna's lack of agency and control in her own narrative. Although on the one hand, these questions reinforce the innocent vulnerability discussed in the previous subordinate theme, these repeated questions of culpability seem to implicitly imply blame, thus perhaps disrupting the participants' provisory positioning as *'ideal'* victims and framing the participants as nonvictims. The enduring nature of these unresolved questions is emphasised through the use of the present tense, indicating a continued and acute sense of perplexity and murkiness regarding this experience and their positioning.

TABLE 2 | Superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Uncertainty in the meaning-making process: The unstable framing of victimhood	Narrative confusion
Narrative strategies of survival	Absence of a narrative blueprint
	Narratives of self-blame: Constructing a deficient identity
	Narratives of self-protection: Constructing a protective identity
Narratives of recovery: Both/And	Haunted in the present and future: Narratives of regression
	Re-scripting meaning: Progressive narratives of adversarial growth
	Both/And: a nonlinear process

3.1.2 | A Lack of Narrative Blueprint

Several participants highlighted the lack of cultural resources available to them to make sense of this experience. Fiona, a 30-year-old woman, who reported experiencing relational bullying in a UK school between the ages of 11 and 15, explained that *[she] didn't have any blueprint to use, or any words to use to describe it* and several participants explained that they had not heard of the term relational bullying prior to seeing the research advertisement. This lack of narrative blueprint extended to questions of morality. Although society tends to renounce overt forms of bullying, Fiona stated that *'the relational side of relational bullying is what makes it so confusing, is that actually maybe there isn't' such a strong moral underpinning of, you know, well is it, is it right or wrong to ignore someone?* Here, Fiona seems to be alluding to the lack of a consistent ethical framework to support individuals to understand this experience. Since the moral scripts are less explicit, it appears to be more challenging for participants to know what is morally acceptable. This ambiguity is perhaps reflected in the significant confusion communicated by participants throughout their narratives. The slight hesitations, use of the word *'maybe'* and the inclusion of a question accentuate the narrator's uncertainty and perhaps point to an internal struggle with uncertainty, doubt and confusion.

For several participants, this lack of cultural and moral blueprint leads to a sense of invisibility where they felt their experiences and victimhood was overlooked. For several participants this positioning was contributed to by the nature of relational bullying which tends to be more difficult to detect and led to participants feeling excluded from potential support and engendering a silence regarding their experience. This silence was reinforced by the behaviour and responses of others. All participants experienced dismissal or avoidance by parents, teachers and/or friends in their lives. For example, Kim, a 36-year-old woman, who recalled experiencing relational bullying in a UK school between the ages of 11 and 13, explained that when she shared that she was experiencing suicidal feelings related to this experience, the school counsellor attributed these feelings to the death of her grandmother, ostensibly rendering her experience invisible. Kim feels that her experience was dismissed and as a result she explained that *'I'd almost been made to feel like this isn't important.'* This statement conveys a sense of near emotional manipulation, where Kim perceives that an external influence attempted to diminish the importance of her experience. The word *'almost'* however, suggests that although this influence was strong, Kim did not fully internalise

this feeling. This ambivalence perhaps points to the complexities, confusion, doubts and potential internal conflict that participants experienced in constructing narratives about their experience.

3.2 | Superordinate Theme 2—Narrative Strategies of Survival

This superordinate theme is divided into two subordinate themes that explore how participants employed narratives which shape their identity as deficient and protected. Given the uncertainty depicted in the previous theme, these identities appear to provide participants with a sense of narrative control and stability, helping them to cope with their experience of relational bullying.

3.2.1 | Narratives of Self-Blame: Constructing a Deficient Identity

A narrative of self-blame which shapes the self as deficient was found across all participants' narratives. Through this narrative, the participants engage in a process of double victimisation which involves victimisation by others and self. Miles, a 53-year-old man who recalled experiencing relational bullying aged 10-16 in a school in the US stated:

deep down I knew this is because there's something wrong with me [...]

It was because I wasn't living up to, you know, they're, I don't know, I guess their standards or their ideas of what was normal or really at the time I thought this, they are what's normal and so I felt abnormal and I think that is the ultimate conclusion that I drew was that I was just a weirdo

Although this extract communicates a lack of clarity in the ambiguity of the words *'standards,' 'normality,' 'abnormality'* and *'something,'* as well as his uncertainty (*'I don't know'* and *'I guess'*), Miles expressed vigorous certainty *'deep down'* that the *'ultimate conclusion'* is that he is in some way abnormal, that there is *'something wrong with [him]'* and he is therefore to blame for this experience. This juxtaposition is found in several participants' narratives amplifying this deep internal struggle, feelings of shame and perhaps pointing to the confusion that participants experienced when narrating questions of agency, responsibility and blame.

The sense of their being '*something wrong*' with themselves was echoed by all participants. Although this nonspecific description communicates a level of uncertainty, it is harnessed as a tool to reinforce the certainty of participants' narratives of self-blame since any perceived flaw can be enlisted to serve this narrative. This in turn perhaps provides a sense of narrative certainty, agency and control, enabling participants to make sense of this behaviour and exert a sense of control over their environment. This increased sense of control is implied by David, a 25-year-old man who reported experiencing relational bullying aged 15 to 18 in a UK school. David stated that '*I kind of felt that there was something wrong with me rather than them doing something that was wrong.*' Here, rather than being positioned as an object who receives the behaviours of others, David is positioned as a subject, the protagonist of the narrative, a position that potentially grants him some narrative control in shaping his identity and self-perception. However, although in some ways these narratives of self-blame may allow participants to exert control over their sense of uncertainty and powerlessness depicted in the previous superordinate theme, this narrative appears to be externally derived and therefore participants' narrative control is shaped and delimited by external influences.

3.2.2 | Narratives of Self-Protection: Constructing a Protective Identity

Several participants created protective identities through the use of vivid metaphors, which appear to provide a real and imagined means for survival. For example, in response to a threatening and isolating environment, Charles, a 60-year-old man who recalled experiencing relational bullying in a school in the United States of America between the ages of 12 and 14 explained that he turned to the fictional character James Bond, created by Ian Fleming, adopting what he calls a '*Bond mentality.*' By immersing himself in this fantasy world of Bond, it seems that Charles is able to partially escape his circumstances, position himself as a protagonist and hero and envision possibilities beyond the constraints of his reality, allowing for narrative rescripting. A sense of narrative control through narrative rescripting is particularly discernible in Charles' imagined narrative ending:

I did virtually kill them, at the end of the book Bond kills them all so so, and that was always very cathartic for me [...] the good guy wins [...] there is justice in the world, or if not justice at least survival

Here Charles was able to establish a sense of narrative control and closure through engaging with the narrative structure of Fleming's books. Through referring to '*the good guy*' and '*justice*,' this narrative draws on a moral allegory narrative. Charles is positioned as a righteous aggressor, as the '*good guy*,' a position that enables him to express his anger and wish for imagined violence. This catharsis is contributed to by the momentary imagined resolution between '*good*' and '*evil*,' and ruling of '*justice*,' which encourages us to support the protagonist while also reinforcing the belief in the possibility of moral order. This '*justice*,' however, is quickly retracted, perhaps denoting a recognition of the discrepancy between this fantastical ending and the actual outcome that Charles experienced.

Similarly, Fiona also describes the creation of a protective identity, describing putting on a '*porcupine suit*' that provided her with a protective armour, which constructed a sense of security and safety while also keeping others at a safe distance. She explained that this protective identity enabled her to develop a more agentic attitude, developing a sense of narrative control and self-determination. Although both these protective identities appear to suggest a sense of agency, there is evidence of an enduring vulnerability and fragility. The defensive and isolated nature of these identities suggest a continued vulnerability and a lack of support from others. This indicates that these protective identities do not allow for a transformation of their identity or the establishment of complete narrative control but rather represent an act of survival that provides a partial sense of protection and a limited or perhaps fantasised sense of narrative control.

3.3 | Superordinate Theme 3: Journeys of Recovery: Both/And

This superordinate theme is divided into three subordinate themes that explore the narration of progressive and regressive narratives. The dynamic plot progression established through the discontinuous, ongoing and unresolved elements of many of the narratives perhaps reflects the continued inner conflicts, uncertainty and struggles experienced at different intensities by the majority of participants.

3.3.1 | Haunted in the Present and Future: Narratives of Regression

All participants communicated the long-term impacts of the experience of being relationally bullied and several participants described being '*haunted*' or '*hounded*' by memories of the experience, providing a deeper understanding of the psychological ramifications of their experiences. For some participants, this haunting is transitory, whereas others describe feeling permanently and profoundly adversely changed through their experience of relational bullying victimisation. This regressive haunting presents a challenge to the narrative progression and some participants appear to be partially suspended in feelings, identities and behaviours related to their past experience of relational bullying.

Clare explained how the '*mental scars*' of this experience have remained with her to this day. The use of the word '*scar*' implies that although this wound is closed, there is a lasting impact of her experiences and a regressive pull towards the past. The notion of '*scars*' is reflected in all participants' narratives, most notably in the functioning of their current relationships and in their sense of self. Participants described feeling suspicious and mistrusting of others, avoiding social situations and struggling with long-term difficulties with self-esteem and self-hatred. These regressive narratives have a melancholic tone, which attests to the participants' sense of hopelessness as they are pulled back into the past and positioned as helpless victims.

For several participants, the haunting of these regressive narratives is projected into the future and several participants described the impacts of the experience as a lifelong or permanent struggle, highlighting the everyday extent and continuity of these

impacts, which seem to stretch both backwards towards the past and forwards into the future. This sense of permanent struggle is further emphasised by Charles who explains that through this experience, he has been '*irrevocably damaged*.' Like Clare's account of '*mental scars*,' Charles feels that his self-concept was permanently disfigured by this experience. For Charles and other participants, these regressive narratives imply an inescapability from the impacts of this experience, denoting a fatalism that reflects a deep conviction that things cannot change. This signifies a largely nonagentic powerless perspective and suggests very little hope for progression.

3.3.2 | *Rescripting Meaning: Progressive Narratives of Adversarial Growth*

In contrast to the previous subordinate theme, the majority of participants also communicated a more progressive and hopeful narrative. For several participants, they feel that this experience has played a fundamental role in shaping them into the people that they are today and all participants shared that they have engaged in therapy since this experience, which has provided a resource for learning about themselves.

Several participants described a process of learning associated with the experience of relational bullying. In this way, participants rescripted their experience as a process of personal growth and enlightenment, particularly shaping their behaviour towards others and supporting them to become more compassionate people. In addition, several participants expressed a progressive narrative of developing strength through suffering. For example, Luke, a 47-year-old man who reported experiencing relational bullying in an Irish school aged 7 to 17, for example, shared a metaphor to understand how individuals can build strength and resilience through adversity:

imagine a blacksmiths forge, but to make that steel it has to be put to such high temperature and to drop it into the water, that metal has to get that hot before it can be made into steel, so I keep telling, you know I used to say them that, yeah, things have been shit for you, but, that's who you are, it's made you who you are now.

Through this vivid metaphorical narrative device of the '*blacksmith's forge*,' Luke evokes a very difficult yet empowering process through which he feels that he has mastered his suffering and been forged into who he is. This forging process parallels the structure of the plot of several of the participants' narratives, where initial uncertainty and conflict are represented by the raw materials that are subsequently transformed through hard emotional suffering and work into the finished steel, representing a progressive character transformation. These rescripted narratives resemble the powerful archetype of the hero's journey where the protagonist endures suffering and often faces inner turmoil, reaching self-discovery and transformation through a positive narrative resolution. These narratives allow participants to shape their own narrative, pointing to the establishment of narrative control and agency.

3.3.3 | *Both/And—A Nonlinear Process*

Several participants' narratives highlighted a complex interaction between a regressive haunting and a progressive rescripting of meaning, highlighting the both/and nature of participants' narratives where forward movements were juxtaposed by backward steps. For the majority of participants, this interplay between regressive and progressive narratives is characterised by an ongoing process. Several participants described the effort that they continue to put in to improve their confidence and shift away from a regressive narrative.

For several participants, this tension between progressive and regressive narratives was present during the interview. For example, Miles voiced that at times he felt embarrassment, vulnerability, and fear during the interview, as though in speaking about his experience '*I'm confessing to these things that are wrong with me. I know that's not true in my head but in my heart it's, you know, it still feels like I'm revealing, you know, who I really am.*' Here, Miles describes a conflict between rational thought and his emotional experience, perhaps illustrating his struggle to find a balance or resolution between these parts of himself. Although Miles appears to be overpowered by the '*heart*' which provides him with a fixed deficient identity that demonstrates a continued pull towards a regressive narrative, Miles' continued awareness of the truth of the '*head*' suggests a continued tension between these parts. This tension is expanded as Miles explained this conflict further: '*It's a combination of um, there's a fear in speaking about it and there's also just a kind of liberation in talking about it um it's, it is freeing.*' Miles again demonstrates the co-existence of regressive and progressive narratives, one that evokes '*fear*' and another that is '*freeing*.' The layering of these conflicting narratives, which appear to demonstrate the interweaving of different periods of time, reflects a nonlinear process of struggle and potential growth.

This sense of a continual process of navigating these opposing forces is further evidenced by Fiona's description of her personal journey as '*learning to ride a bike*.' Fiona explained that the bike is a bit '*wobbly*,' '*will get flat tyres*' and '*someone*' will '*stick a stick in the front tyre*' but '*you keep trying to ride the bike*.' The imagery of the bike provides a metaphorical narrative device that highlights Fiona's personal journey facing significant challenges through which she has experienced personal growth. The image of learning to ride a bike evokes childhood memories, conjuring the transitional journey from childhood to adulthood, and perhaps represents the acquisition of competence, confidence and skills that have contributed to Fiona's path of healing and contribute to an increasing sense of narrative control. The potential healing and freedom provided by the bike, however, is juxtaposed and delimited by a sense of the inevitability of the damage to her bike, perhaps representing a deterministic view of suffering and a continued sense of powerlessness and lack of agency. This fatalism contributes to a sense of tragedy, evoking an image of a tragic hero and reflecting a tension between fate and free will. In addition, unidentified external forces that cause damage to the bike perhaps reflects the moral ambiguity and lack of accountability described by participants in previous superordinate themes. The sustained effort described by Miles and Fiona is perhaps reflective of participants' sustained struggle to assert

narrative agency and continued grappling with the meaning of their suffering.

4 | Discussion

Although limited quantitative studies have explored the association between relational bullying experiences and adult outcomes, this research provides an in-depth exploration of the subjective meaning-making processes of this experience across time through the analysis of the content, structure and function of eight participants' narratives. Three superordinate themes presented demonstrate the participants' meaning-making processes, outlining uncertainty in the meaning-making process, narrative survival strategy of self-blame and self-protection and nonlinear narratives of recovery.

4.1 | Directionality of Relational Bullying Victimisation Narratives

The regressive and progressive narratives identified in this research support research that has highlighted the significance of peer relationships across the lifespan (Laible 2007). The demonstration of both progressive and regressive narratives relating to this experience is supportive of and expands upon T. Brown's (2020) doctoral research in which participants reported continued struggles with self-esteem, self-concept and high levels of anxiety as well as the development of increased resilience and agency through this experience. Participants' regressive narratives highlight several potential adverse impacts to individuals' self-concept and relationships which supports the limited quantitative research that demonstrates the long-term relationship between relational bullying in adolescence and social anxiety, social stress, low self-esteem and other internalising difficulties in adulthood (Boulton 2013; Dempsey and Storch 2008; Heretick 2014). Participants' progressive narratives highlighted the development of increased resilience and agency through this experience and contributes to understandings of this process, pointing to processes of narrative rescripting through learning, strength building and enduring suffering, experiences that are reflective of the archetypal story of the hero's journey (McAdams 2019). In addition, the emphasis on the role of narrative rescripting is supportive of research that has proposed the significance of positive narrative resolution in moderating the association between relational bullying victimisation and depression (Song et al. 2021). It could be hypothesised that through rescripting their narratives, individuals may be able to access processes of posttraumatic growth, which may in turn protect them from experiencing depression.

In addition, the finding of both regressive and progressive narratives relating to this experience is similar to the findings from retrospective and prospective longitudinal qualitative research exploring generalised bullying that has highlighted perceived negative impacts as well as experiences of posttraumatic growth (see Carlisle and Rofes 2007; de Lara 2016, 2019; Lidberg et al. 2023, 2024; Pabian and Vandebosch 2021; Thornberg et al. 2013). This current research, exploring diachronic as well as synchronic data, builds on these findings to explore the complex interplay between these narratives, echoing research on childhood developmental trauma that has highlighted the

complex interplay of negative and positive meanings (Weindl and Lueger-Schuster 2018b).

4.2 | Uncertainty and Contextualised Meaning-Making Processes

Prominent narratives of uncertainty, expressed through participants' sense of narrative shock, confusion and repeated questioning, as well as their accounts of a lack of cultural narrative resources appeared to be connected to feelings of powerlessness and a lack of narrative agency. A sense of confusion and a lack of narrative coherence have been observed in individuals in the aftermath of several different adverse events (Ehlers and Clark 2000; Wigren 1994). In research exploring the effect of generalised bullying, victimisation has been hypothesised to disrupt processes of signification, leading to confusion, lack of coherence and feelings of powerlessness (Cour et al. 2022). This current research provides an explicitly contextualised perspective regarding the processes of signification, highlighting how a lack of a narrative blueprint may contribute to individuals' meaning-making processes. Indeed, several participants in this study reported having not heard of the term relational bullying prior to seeing the research advertisement. This absence of terminology may be related to the void of cultural knowledge found in previous research (Chester et al. 2023, 2017; P. Smith et al. 2008). This lack of cultural awareness may contribute to participants' sense of uncertainty, making it difficult for victims to speak clearly and directly of their experience without adequate language or narrative framings, further complicating signification processes.

4.3 | Defensive Structures

A potent narrative of characterological self-blame was found across all participants' narratives, both through the alignment of perceived external narratives and internal self-narratives, and through repeated questions of culpability. Through these processes, participants narrated the development of a deficient identity. This supports and expands upon research that has found high levels of self-blaming tendencies amongst school age children who have experienced relational bullying victimisation (Chen and Chen 2019). Given the purported relationship between self-blame attributions and negative outcomes, this narrative of self-blame may play an important role in participants' continued struggle with their self-concept and in relationships (Tilghman-Osborne et al. 2008). Research exploring generalised bullying has proposed that this self-blame may represent a defence mechanism whereby individuals cope with their emotional distress by believing that the environment is good while they are bad (Carlisle and Rofes 2007; Fairbairn 1994). Although not usually understood as a coping mechanism per se, this self-blame narrative appears to allow participants to exert a sense of control over their sense of uncertainty through aligning perceived external narratives with internal-self narratives (Cour et al. 2022). The notion that self-blame narratives provide a sense of agency has been found in research exploring other forms of adverse experiences (C. Brown 2013). It is generally recognised, however, that choice and agency are shaped and constrained by culture (Butler 1993). For example, research exploring women's stories of trauma has highlighted the role of the dominant patriarchal cultural context and related master narratives in shaping

individuals' meaning-making processes (C. Brown 2013). Previous research exploring relational bullying has highlighted experiences of normalisation, minimisation, trivialisation and dismissal as well as a general historical disregard for the role of peer relations on developmental outcomes (Chester et al. 2017; Turner 2015). This current research has highlighted the moral ambiguity, lack of accountability, invisibility and lack of support that participants experienced. It is likely that this cultural and moral context, as well as the definitional confusion previously mentioned, contributed to participants' narrative meaning-making. It is probable that this context may have encouraged individuals to adopt self-blaming narratives.

In addition, the research presented two examples of narratives of self-protection, expanding upon research that has illuminated potential processes of self-defence in relation to relational and generalised bullying victimisation (T. Brown 2020; Lidberg et al. 2023). In this current research, the self-protective narratives, which included elements of fantasy and the development of an imagined defensive identity, employed potent metaphors. These metaphors appear to provide a sense of fantasised protection, providing an insight into how participants coped with being relationally bullied as well as the associated emotions that they experienced. The use of metaphors has been related to an insufficiency of literal resources in language to fully convey meaning and emotion (Black 1979). This may be especially the case for individuals who have experienced relational bullying and who may encounter a lack of narrative resources to make sense of this experience.

4.4 | Navigating Agency and Victimhood

Across the three superordinate themes presented in this research, participants' narratives expressed struggles with control in relation to their meaning-making processes and their positioning at different points in the narrative denoting differing degrees of agency. This movement in positions, depicted in the nonlinear narrative structures, has been found across other forms of victimhood and may be related to the negotiation of the complex double bind of victimhood (Leisenring 2006; Thunberg and Bruck 2020). On the one hand, the claiming of a victim identity can be useful in representing experiences, making sense of one's self and others, achieving political recognition and eliciting compassion, care and support, thus potentially conferring agency (Sayar 2019; Van Dijk 2020). Many feminist writers, however, have highlighted that victimhood is also an identity where individuals are often seen as passive, weak, powerless and helpless, thus undercutting agency (Minow 1992). Participants' shifting positions in relation to victimhood and agency may reflect the negotiation of this double bind while also highlighting a complex multidimensional view of victimhood (Arfman et al. 2016). The complexity of this negotiation may be further contributed to by the lack of cultural resources available for participants to make sense of this experience, further constraining individuals' narrative possibilities.

4.5 | Limitations and Future Directions

Several participants explained that they experienced several forms of bullying across their childhood and therefore it is

unlikely that the results of this research apply to relational bullying exclusively. This dilemma, however, is reflective of the significant overlap between bullying subtypes as well as research that has found that the co-occurrence of victimisation subtypes is common in adolescents and is therefore reflective of prevalent victimisation experiences (Bradshaw et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2010). Nevertheless, it may be useful for future research to explore this further and compare the narrative content and structure across different bullying subtypes. In addition, since relational bullying often involves complex group dynamics, exploring the narratives of multiple actors in the group, including the recipient of the behaviour, the perpetrator(s) and other roles such as bystander(s) and defender(s) might provide a fuller understanding of this experience and the group processes involved. Furthermore, this research employed a retrospective approach to data collection. Several limitations of retrospective studies have been highlighted by research, including the issue of recall bias (Hardt and Rutter 2004). Although narrative approaches are focused on interpretative meaning-making processes rather than whether an event happened exactly as recalled, it may be useful for further narrative research to incorporate a longitudinal approach, conducting multiple interviews at distinct points in time, allowing researchers to explore the directionality of individuals' narratives over time and investigate how the past, present and future are interwoven and rewoven (Parker 2005).

Additionally, the majority of participants in this research were White and from Western Countries and all experienced relational bullying in the United Kingdom, United States or Ireland. Since narratives are inherently contextually situated, this research provides a narrow range of cultural perspectives while potentially reinforcing dominant cultural narratives (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). Further research exploring narrative meaning-making processes across a range of cultures may be particularly relevant given that this research has highlighted the importance of contextualised perspectives. In addition, given the lack of cultural resources and language available for participants to narrate this experience, as well as the definitional confusion reported by participants and found across this research area, further research is required to clarify the existing ambiguities and inconsistencies in this research field. For instance, research could delve deeper into the behaviours included under the term relational bullying and could develop theoretical models to explicate the ways in which relational forms of bullying develop. Clearer definitions could provide greater clarity for victims and practitioners, challenge normative assumptions of relational bullying, expand and enrich the broader cultural vocabulary available to understand this experience and could potentially foster an environment in which victims are better understood and supported.

4.6 | Clinical Implications

This study's findings highlight several important considerations for clinical practice. The recommendations detailed are relevant for all mental health professionals working with this client group and are particularly appropriate for Counselling Psychologists' life-span developmental, relational, contextualised and strengths-based approach (Milton et al. 2010).

The narrative themes raised in this research provide a resource for mental health practitioners working with adults who have experienced relational bullying in adolescence. It is important for practitioners to recognise the potential role of peer attachment histories in shaping clients' internal working models and practitioners who work with clients with this client group should maintain an awareness of the potential significant impact that this experience may have had on their clients (Bowlby 1969). As other researchers have suggested, it may be helpful for practitioners to conceptualise this experience through the lens of developmental trauma and perhaps within the ACE framework (Carlisle and Rofes 2007; Pabian and Vandebosch 2021). The narratives presented highlight a process of both/and and therefore practitioners should avoid deterministic views of this experience. Since posttraumatic growth is often understood as a process of narrative development, narrative contributions to the field, such as strength based narrative restructuring, may be of particular relevance (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). In addition, a prevailing experience across all participants' accounts and a finding supported by previous research, was an experience of dismissal, avoidance and/or lack of support from others. This highlights the importance of a therapeutic relationship that incorporates humanistic relational attributes, creating the conditions for a facilitative and supportive environment.

This research highlights a prominent narrative of self-blame amongst participants. In working with clients, processes of cognitive restructuring or specifically reattribution training which can work to reframe attributions and challenge inaccurate or unfair self-blame may be useful (Beck 2021). It may be prudent for practitioners to exercise caution when working in deficit focused approaches which may have the effect of reinforcing narratives of self-blame. It may be useful to adopt a contextualised approach that acknowledges the role of the whole environment, including the discursive context of meaning in which their experiences and narratives emerge (C. Brown 2013). Re-contextualising clients' difficulties and questioning dominant individualising self-blame narratives may support clients to make new meaning from their experiences as well as providing more expansive language and tools for meaning-making processes relating to the complexities of victimhood. Practitioners should be aware of how discourses of victimhood may shape and delimit clients' agency and should exercise caution regarding any prescriptive use of this label.

Traditionally, psychology and therapeutic approaches often adopted an intra-psycho approach but many researchers have highlighted that effective psychological interventions should be directed at the community and societal level (Fox and Prilleltensky 1997). Practitioners working with children and in schools are well positioned to advocate for greater awareness of relational bullying, promote a safer school climate and develop intervention strategies in schools. Through this work, as well as through one-to-one work across the lifespan, it may be possible to shift dominant cultural narratives of normalisation and dismissal, increase recognition of this experience, enrich the cultural discourse surrounding this experience and enhance and improve the support provided to individuals.

Author Contributions

Gabrielle Erhardt: writing – review and editing, investigation, writing – original draft, methodology, data curation, resources, formal analysis, conceptualization. **Emma Kay:** supervision. **Zetta Kougioli:** supervision. **Angela Ioanna Loulopoulou:** supervision.

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Ethics Statement

The research for this project was submitted for ethics consideration under the reference PSYC 23/459 in the School of Psychology and was approved under the procedures of the University of Roehampton's Research Integrity and Ethics Committee on 27/06/23. This research has adhered to the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2021) and the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018), which outlines four ethical principles: respect, competence, responsibility and integrity. These principles were applied to the decision-making processes and the behaviour of the researcher throughout the research.

Consent

All identity and contact details provided by participants were treated confidentially and data including recordings were stored securely according to the Data Protection Act (2018). Pseudonyms have been used throughout the research process. Informed consent was received from all participants.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting Information S1: mps270013-sup-0001-suppl-data.docx.