

“Words Will Always Hurt Me”:

South African University Students’ Experiences of Female Relational
Aggression.

Saajida Kharwa

Supervisor: Cynthia Patel

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters
by Dissertation in the Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied
Human Sciences, College of Humanities at the University of
KwaZulu-Natal, December 2015.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination at any other University.

Saajida Kharwa
22nd March 2016

Cynthia Patel
Supervisor
22nd March 2016

Acknowledgements

This dissertation could not have been completed without the constant encouragement and support I have received throughout the process. As such, I express my utmost appreciation the following people, who have contributed to the realisation of this goal:

To my husband, Mohamed, who encouraged me to see this through to completion and who has been an unwavering pillar of support.

To my supervisor, Cynthia, for all the assistance. Your valuable feedback and critical conceptualisations have helped me hone my skills as a researcher, and I could not have done this without you.

To my family and friends, old and new, for exercising patience, providing encouragement and believing in my potential to succeed.

To the research team at MANCOSA, for providing enthusiastic support, advice, and many lighthearted moments.

To my research participants, without whom this would not have been possible. Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences with me and for being honest and open about them.

Abstract

This study explored a non-physical, covert form of aggression known as Relational Aggression (RA) from the perspective of young adult women. The aim of the study was to explore how young adult women defined and understood RA. It also aimed to provide a description of their personal experiences with RA.

A qualitative research design, located within a constructivist grounded theory framework, was used to guide the study. Initial data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews with 13 female university students between the ages of 18 and 25 from Durban, SouthAfrica. After tentative explanations and categories had been developed, theoretical sampling was conducted to test these interpretations. The theoretical sampling process involved semi-structured interviews with 3 additional female university students between the ages of 18-25. The final results of the analysis resulted in the emergence of four core categories and fivesub-categories. In accordance with previous research on aggression, the results suggested that RA was pervasive and normative amongst young adult women. It was associated with challenges in female friendships, which were complicated by issues of jealousy and competition, as well as the struggle to attain popularity and an idealised/stereotypical image.

The findings highlighted the serious nature of RA and the impact it had on the lives of young women. The findings also illustrated the need for further research on this topic in order to raise awareness and to devise effective ways of dealing with it.

Keywords

Pervasive, normative, young adult women, female friendships, jealousy, competition, popularity, idealised femininity.

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
List of tables.....	vii
List of figures.....	vii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
1.1. Definitions and Measures of RA.....	2
1.2. RA and Young Females	5
1.2.1. Female Friendships	5
1.2.2. The Dark Side of Popularity	7
1.2.3. The Influence of the Media.....	8
1.3. The South African Context	8
1.4. Rationale of the Present Study.....	9
1.4.1. The Gap in Research.....	9
1.4.2. Implications of Unchecked RA.....	10
1.4.3. Relevance for Psychology.....	11
1.4.4. Summary	11
1.4.5. Research Aim and Questions	11
Chapter Two: Literature Review	13
2.1. Theoretical Framework.....	13
2.1.1. Social Role Theory	14
2.1.2. Social Learning Theory.....	16
2.1.3. The Feminist Perspective	17
2.2. Empirical Review.....	19
2.2.1. Research on Young Samples	20
2.2.2. Research on Adult Samples	25
2.3. Summary	29
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	30
3.1. Introduction.....	30
3.2. Research Design.....	30

3.4. Sample Description	33
3.5. Data Collection	36
Table 2: Interview Guide	39
3.6. Addressing Quality in Qualitative Research.....	40
3.7. Data Analysis	41
3.8. Ethical Considerations	42
3.8.1. Procedural Ethics	43
3.8.2. “Ethics in Practice”	44
3.9. Summary	44
Chapter Four: Results	46
4.1. Outline of the Data Analysis Process.....	46
4.2. Initial Coding	49
4.3. Focused Coding	50
Table 4: Focused Coding Process	51
4.4. Memo-writing	52
4.5. Theoretical Sampling	53
4.6. The Core Categories	56
4.7. Summary	62
Chapter Five: Discussion	63
5.1. Introduction.....	63
5.2. Understandings of RA.....	63
5.2.1. Normalised RA Amongst Females	64
5.3. Experiences of RA	68
5.3.1. Fragile Friendships.....	69
5.3.1. Conflict in Friendships.....	69
5.3.2. Strategies for Dealing with Conflict	71
5.4. Jealousy and Competition	73
5.5. Popularity and Idealised or Stereotypical Femininity.....	74
5.6. Reflections on the Research Process.....	77
5.7. Summary	81
Chapter Six: Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations	82
6.1. Summary	82
6.2. Conclusion	83
6.3. Recommendations for Future Research	87

References.....	88
Appendix One: Interview Schedule	100
Appendix Two – A : Informed Consent	102
Appendix Two – B: Declaration of informed consent.....	104
Appendix Three: Ethical Clearance	105

List of tables

Table 1: Characteristics of Initial Sampling Participants	35
Table 2: Interview Guide	39
Table 3: Initial Coding Process	50
Table 4: Focused Coding Process	51
Table 5: Characteristics of Theoretical Sampling Participants.....	54

List of figures

Figure 1: Diagrammatical Representation of Categories and Sub-Categories	48
Figure 2: Memo – Zanele’s Interview	53

Chapter One: Introduction

Silence is deeply woven into the fabric of the female experience. Now it is time to end another silence: There is a hidden culture of girls' aggression in which bullying is epidemic, distinctive and destructive....Our culture refuses girls access to open conflict, and it forces their aggression into nonphysical, indirect and covert forms (Simmons, 2002, p.3).

Relational Aggression (hereafter referred to as RA) is a phenomenon that appears to be prevalent in society, particularly amongst the female population. It is a form of non-physical violence and aggression. In recent years, there has been greater awareness of the impact of physical forms of violence, due to a rise in the number of violent incidents reported around the world. Such incidents have occurred in private as well as public spaces. Schools, which were once considered safe environments, have also witnessed the occurrence of mass killings. Researchers have found that violence appears to be particularly prevalent in developing countries, where high levels of political and economic change are often experienced (Clammer, 2012). South Africa, in particular, is currently regarded as one of the most violent societies in the world. An estimated 1.8 million South African pupils have experienced some form of physical violence at school, such as hitting and punching, or nonphysical violence, such as verbal taunting (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011).

The increased attention on violence and aggression has also led to a greater awareness of non-physical forms of violence and aggression such as RA. In some of the tragic school shootings that have occurred in the United States, it was discovered that the shooters had been victims of RA, implying that these incidents may have been preceded by experiences of RA (Fifield, 2010). It has also been suggested that the effects of RA are perhaps even more harmful than the effects of other forms of aggression (Kuppens, Laurent, Heyvaert & Onghena, 2013) and there is a higher incidence of RA among females than among males (Goldberg, 2009). Given that there has been a rise in the number of violence-related incidents around the world, a closer look at both physical and non-physical forms of aggression seems to be of vital importance. Current research on RA has been limited to a Western perspective.

Exploring RA in a diverse context (such as the South African context) could prove useful in informing global prevention and intervention efforts (Lansford et al., 2012).

The current study thus aimed to explore the lived experiences of RA in a sample of South African female university students between the ages of 18-25. The sections that follow contain background information to the main research questions, “How is RA understood by young South African women?” and “What are some of the experiences they have had with RA?” The main issues that contextualise the phenomenon include the use of predominantly quantitative measures of aggression, as well as the links between RA and female friendships, RA and popularity, and portrayals of RA in the media. These issues are discussed in the sections below. The gaps in the current research on aggression have been illustrated, demonstrating the need for qualitative research from the perspective of young South African women. This is supported by a discussion of the detrimental effects of unchecked RA and the relevance of RA for the field of psychology.

1.1. Definitions and Measures of RA

Non-physical aggression has been described as a covert alternative to physical forms of aggression. It is perceived as a form of horizontal violence and psychological abuse (Ringrose, 2006). Researchers such as Crick, Casas and Ku (1999) make a clear delineation between physical aggression and non-physical aggression:

In contrast to physical victimization, in which children are harmed and controlled through physical damage or by the threat of such damage (e.g., being pushed or shoved, being threatened with physical harm unless a peer's request is obeyed), relationally victimized children are harmed through peers' attempts to damage or control their relationships with others (e.g., being excluded from an important event such as a birthday party when a peer's request is not obeyed, being the target of a hostile rumor within the peer group).(p.379)

Although consensus has not yet been reached about definitions of non-physical aggression, many researchers describe it as a form of bullying (Coyne, Archer & Eslea, 2004). Olweus (2003), a leading researcher on the topic, defines bullying as a negative action that is carried

out through physical contact or with the use of language. It involves a perceived imbalance of power between the bully and the victim (Anderson, 2010; Olweus, 2003). This enables the perpetrator to exercise dominance over the victim (Sesar, Barisic, Pandza, & Dodaj, 2012). Bullying continues for a sustained period of time and results in damaging consequences such as low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. The academic performance of victims also suffers, as they frequently stay absent from school in order to avoid being humiliated by bullies. More importantly, victims of bullying can become bullies themselves and become trapped in an enduring cycle of violence (Eisenbraun, 2007). In the most extreme cases, bullying has led to death. Victims either commit suicide or express their suffering by harming others, as in situations like the Columbine massacre or the Sandy Hook school killings (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011).

Other researchers label non-physical aggression either as “indirect aggression”, “social aggression” or “relational aggression”. “Indirect aggression” was a term first introduced by Feshbach in 1969. It refers to behaviours aimed at harming a target by rejection or exclusion (Card, Stucky, Swalani & Little, 2008). According to Meyer et al. (2008), it is one of the most covert forms of nonphysical aggression amongst adolescents, and often escapes the notice of teachers, school counsellors and parents.

“Social aggression” was first introduced in 1989. It has been defined as manipulating group acceptance through ostracism or character attacks (Card et al., 2008; Coyne, Archer & Eslea, 2006). It is specifically aimed at damaging the victim’s self-esteem or social status (Meyer et al., 2008)

“RA” can be described as a way of harming others through the use of peer relationships (Card et al., 2008; Coyne et al., 2006). Specifically, it comprises of subtle acts, both verbal and nonverbal, that are carried out against someone with the intent of damaging the victim’s reputation or isolating the individual from her or his peers. Verbal forms of RA include indirectly aggressive acts such as gossiping, writing notes or talking about someone, and spreading rumours (Crothers, Field & Kolbert, 2005; Goldberg, Smith-Adcock & Dixon, 2011). They also include directly aggressive acts, such as threatening someone or informing them that they are not welcome in the group. Nonverbal forms of RA involve body language and specific actions such as giving a person nasty looks, rolling one’s eyes at the target, and giving them the silent treatment (Crothers et al., 2005; Goldberg et al., 2011). The threat of

social isolation, a powerful stimulus for females, is ever-present in the enactment of RA (Goldberg, 2009).

The phenomenon first gained significant attention in the 1990s, when Crick and Grotpeter (1995) developed a scale to assess RA and physical aggression among children from grades three to six. Their findings provided initial support for the conceptualisation of RA as an independent and distinct form of aggression. The findings also indicated gender differences in the use of aggression, with girls displaying a tendency to use RA instead of physical aggression. Similar studies conducted by other researchers seemed to confirm these findings, and Crick and Grotpeter are now regarded as pioneers in the field of RA research (McEvoy, Estrem, Rodriguez & Olson, 2003).

It is important to note that RA occurs amongst males as well as females (Reynolds & Repetti, 2010). Many researchers, however, maintain that RA remains far more prevalent in female interactions (Goldberg, 2009). Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) study also found that compared to boys, girls experienced incidents of RA as more distressing. Doyle and McLoughlin (2010) support this finding, suggesting that girls "are more attuned to and affected by relational aggression than are boys" (p.2). Accordingly, the current study has been designed to focus on RA from the perspective of young women.

There remains a degree of confusion around the use of the terms "indirect aggression", "social aggression" and "relational aggression" (Hammel, 2008). Consensus has not yet been reached on whether these are all distinct forms of aggression, or are essentially the same (Coyne et al., 2006). Some researchers make a clear distinction between indirect aggression, social aggression and RA. Most researchers, though, acknowledge that the constructs share similarities, and their boundaries are flexible and indistinct. Meyer et al. (2008) claim that the constructs are intertwined and that they often occur simultaneously. The authors point out that the terms converge around common themes, such as avoiding direct confrontation and targeting the victim's relations with others (Card et al., 2008). Simmons (2002) suggests that there are very slight differences in the behaviours described by each term, and that they all form part of the "alternate aggressions" (p.30).

The lack of consensus around definitions of non-physical aggression has resulted in the use of diverse measures. The majority of these measures have been adapted from measures of physical aggression (Kotze, 2007). This is due to the fact that physical aggression is more easily observed, whilst non-physical forms of aggression can be difficult to identify and examine (Hadley, 2004). Measures of non-physical aggression are also predominantly quantitative in nature (Kotze, 2007). There have been few qualitative studies that explore personal experiences of indirect aggression, social aggression and RA (Brown, 1998; Campbell, 1993; Gilligan & Brown, 1992).

The present study attempts to redress this by using a qualitative approach to explore subjective experiences of RA. RA has been selected as it encompasses elements of all three forms of non-physical aggression and is regarded as “the heart of alternative aggressions” (Simmons, 2002, p.43). The term “RA” is used throughout the study to refer to all forms of nonphysical or alternate aggression.

1.2. RA and Young Females

1.2.1. Female Friendships

It is a widely accepted belief that females are social beings who seek to form connections with other individuals (Crothers et al., 2005). The friendships they form with other women are among the most important relationships in their lives. As girls mature, their friendships begin to have a significant effect on their adjustment and well-being (Crothers et al., 2005; Goldberg, et al., 2011). Intimate friendships also have a powerful impact on the development of identity and self-worth (Erikson, 1968; Huntley & Owens, 2006). For young adult women, friendships with other women are often associated with positive psychological functioning and reduced stress levels (Goldberg et al., 2011).

These relationships not always positive, though; there is also a potentially harmful aspect to them. RA usually occurs within the context of established friendships (Field, Crothers & Kolbert, 2006) and is fuelled by the passion and deep knowledge of these relationships. The most hurtful attacks are, in fact, derived from the shared confidences of an intimate friendship. The closer the victim is to the perpetrator, the more intense the damage (Simmons, 2002).

Researchers have proposed various explanations for why RA occurs predominantly in female friendships. According to Brown (2005), it occurs as a result of the high emphasis girls place on their friendships. Girls seem to value their same-sex friendships more than boys do, and regard these friendships as interpersonally rewarding. At the same time, girls experience greater levels of tension in their friendships than boys do (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Field et al. (2006) suggest that RA arises when girls do not assertively discuss their thoughts or feelings about conflicts that are affecting the relationship. Relationally aggressive acts are used as a tool to express anger towards a friend for perceived wrongs, or to punish the friend for inappropriate behaviour. They are also used to force a friend to comply with certain beliefs and behaviours. According to Simmons (2002) the enactment of RA in female friendships is driven by a fear of loss and isolation. It is so powerful that it causes girls to avoid direct confrontation during conflict situations, using covert means instead (Field et al., 2006). Girls will go to great lengths to avoid isolation, even if this means enduring painful and emotionally abusive relationships with other females (Simmons, 2002).

RA is perhaps most evident in the formation of cliques and alliances. A clique is a relatively small, intimate group of friends. Huntley and Owens (2006) assert that cliques can be harmful, as they exclude those who do not meet certain criteria and they tend to routinely pick people as targets for RA. Clique membership may be coveted because it rewards members with popularity or increased social status. As a result, there is a great deal of competition for these positions and girls often use RA to hurt others in their pursuit of clique membership (Goldberg, 2009). Alliances are *ad hoc* cliques. While cliques are mainly established to meet friendship needs, alliances are formed as a weapon to be used in battles of RA. Forming an alliance enables a girl to gain the encouragement and support of others in situations of conflict with another girl. The perpetrator knows that she has a group of friends who will accept and understand her displays of aggression. The other members of the group also gain a sense of inclusion and purpose from the alliance (Simmons, 2002).

Cliques and alliances provide a degree of protection for those who engage in RA. They diffuse responsibility from one individual to the entire group, and are regarded as a sign of peer acceptance (Huntley & Owens, 2006; Simmons, 2002). However, membership in a clique or alliance does not always guarantee a girl's safety from becoming a target of RA

herself. These groups sometimes use covert means of aggression to punish members for behaviour that is deemed inappropriate (Huntley & Owens, 2006).

Given that females value their close friendships with other females, it can be argued that these relationships should be regarded as important in the context of research on RA. Kotze (2007), however, points out that there is a paucity of research exploring the connection between female friendships and RA. Ringrose (2006) reiterates the need for qualitative research from a feminist perspective in order to unpack the dynamics of female conflicts. Kotze (2007) adds that there appears to be a need for further research on this issue from a South African perspective.

1.2.2. The Dark Side of Popularity

RA is also associated with popularity. Although there appears to be no evidence in the existing literature which suggests that girls value popularity more than boys do, research on the link between RA and popularity seems to associate it more frequently with girls than with boys. In particular, the “mean girl” is portrayed as a testament to the dark side of popularity. Rose, Swenson and Waller (2004) note that there has been a significant amount of empirical research conducted in order to clearly define what is meant by the term “popularity”. Two constructs have since been developed: “Sociometric popularity” refers to an individual who is liked and admired by others, while “Perceived popularity” refers to someone who is labelled as popular, but is not necessarily liked by others. Perceived popularity is the construct more closely related to RA and meanness amongst females (Rose et al., 2004).

Popularity is regarded as a desired social status amongst girls that cuts across boundaries of race and class. It is associated with “idealised femininity”; the cultural expectations about femininity and behaviour that girls need to meet in order to gain the coveted status of popularity (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p.83). Many girls crave popularity because it gives them an immense feeling of power over others. Attaining this power, however, comes at a price (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2007). Popularity is often treated as a competition in which relationships are used as a means to end. This can create an environment in which RA thrives (Simmons, 2002).

1.2.3. The Influence of the Media

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which forms part of the theoretical framework for this study, suggests that the media serves as an important source of information and can have a significant impact on people's behaviour. Depictions of aggression on television, for instance, can have an influence on how viewers react to situations of conflict. In the past decade there has been a proliferation of books dealing with RA and discussions about the 'mean girl' situation, such as *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence* (Wiseman, 2009), *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (Simmons, 2002) and *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls* (Brown, 2005). These books have brought RA to the forefront of the discussion on girls' bullying and the phenomenon has received a substantial amount of mainstream attention (Ryalls, 2011). The television and film industry have capitalised on the commercial success of the mean girl image, and there have been a number of mainstream films aimed at adolescent females (Cecil, 2008). Feminist theorists suggest that many of the films contain inherently sexist messages about aggression, as well as unhealthy examples of female aggression that could perpetuate RA (Goldberg, Smith-Adcock & Dixon, 2011, p.379). There is a danger that this type of on-screen behaviour might be modelled by young women (Goldberg, 2009).

1.3. The South African Context

Ryalls (2011) observes that the media depicts RA as a Western phenomenon that occurs amongst middle-class white girls. There are few media representations and studies that focus on female relationships and aggression in a diverse, non-Western context. As a result, Simmons (2002) makes the comment that "the rich diversity of female relationships found among other races, ethnicities, and class backgrounds has often been overlooked" (p.201).

In reality, RA is a universal phenomenon which cuts across boundaries of nationality, race, class and gender (Ryalls, 2011). It is of particular relevance in this country, as Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) note that violence has become accepted as a way of life for many South Africans. The Apartheid regime created divisions and conflict amongst people on the basis of race, and carried out numerous acts of violence against those who resisted its commands. Although Apartheid was abolished in 1994, the legacy of this regime continues to be felt in

the deep-rooted patterns of discrimination, resentment and aggression that still exist in parts of the country. Anderson (2010) suggests that bullying and aggression in South Africa have developed as result of the lingering effects of Apartheid.

For example, in a sample of 339 students from schools in the Free State Province, over 70% reported being victims of verbal aggression. In another study, 29% of the girls from 60 South African schools recounted experiences of non-physical aggression. According to Anderson (2010), these statistics imply that RA is a common occurrence in South Africa, especially amongst females. The author adds that many of these incidents “are nested within entrenched patterns of racial conflict and derogatory attitudes” (p.3).

Aggression and bullying in the South African context have, however, received little attention from researchers (Kotze, 2007). In keeping with the international trend, the studies that have been conducted by South African researchers (Govender, 2007; Guy, 2009; Penning, 2009; Penning, Bhagwanjee& Govender, 2010) have mainly focused on the issue of bullying amongst boys. There appears to be a lack of systematic research on female aggression and on RA in particular (Anderson, 2010; Swart & Bredekamp, 2009).

1.4. Rationale of the Present Study

The present study has been designed to address the need to explore the use of RA amongst young adult samples, as well as non-Western samples. It is also motivated by research indicating the negative implications of unchecked RA. The results and conclusions drawn from this study will hopefully create awareness and provide useful insight into the phenomenon of RA, as well as stimulate further research in this area. The information could be used to inform possible prevention and intervention efforts. RA also has relevance for the field of psychology. Psychologists can make use of this information to better understand problems of this nature in order to assist clients in overcoming such challenges.

1.4.1. The Gap in Research

Female aggression has traditionally received less attention than male aggression and thus remains far less understood (Reynolds & Repetti, 2010). Researchers further suggest that information about RA is still in its early stages when compared to information about physical

aggression (McEvoy et al., 2003; Nelson & Crick, 2002). Much of the research on RA thus far has focused on adolescent girls. Consequently, the use of RA amongst young adult females is an area that remains largely unexplored. Given the fact that relationally aggressive behaviour continues into adulthood, and that some researchers are of the opinion that RA might actually increase with age, there appears to be crucial need to explore RA from the perspective of young adult females (Goldberg et al., 2011).

In particular, there seems to be a need for research on RA in the university environment. According to Brock, Oikonomidou, Wulfing, Pennington and Obenchain (2014), there is a growing body of research which suggests that physical and non-physical forms of aggression are frequently carried out at university level. It therefore seems necessary to gain a better understanding of RA in the university context.

Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck (2010) recommend that qualitative research be conducted, as much of the research conducted on RA thus far has been quantitative in nature. The authors also suggest that the personal experiences of participants need be explored in RA research. There seems to be a scarcity of research examining individuals' experiences of specific acts of RA, as either victims or perpetrators. Reynolds and Repetti (2010) concur with these statements, adding that there is a need to investigate how RA is defined and understood by those who are directly affected by it.

The present study has attempted to address these gaps by using a qualitative approach, and more specifically grounded theory, which aims to generate theories or models that are grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006), in order to explore female university students' understandings. The study has also aimed to contextualise these understandings within the participants' personal accounts of RA.

1.4.2. Implications of Unchecked RA

Most researchers acknowledge that RA carries a number of potentially damaging effects (McEvoy et al., 2003). It can lead to depression, substance abuse, risky sexual behaviour, disordered eating, and suicidal ideation. RA can also result in poor interpersonal skills and psychological and social maladjustment (Botha, 2014; Goldberg et al., 2011). Some theorists, in fact, consider RA to be the most dangerous form of bullying with regard to self-esteem

(Hammel, 2008). The study will hopefully raise awareness of the nature and impact of RA, and thus inform efforts to prevent and reduce RA. It appears evident that RA can be deeply hurtful to individuals, resulting in negative consequences such as anxiety, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, loneliness and depression (Sesar et al., 2012). As a result, it seems to be of vital importance that effective intervention programmes be developed to help reduce RA.

1.4.3. Relevance for Psychology

The negative effects of RA on the social and psychological development of victims and perpetrators, as well as the association between RA and psychopathology, indicate that this is an area which is relevant to psychology. The expertise of psychologists can be drawn on in order to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies. In turn, psychologists could benefit from education about RA, as this will assist them in identifying what RA looks like and the possible effects it can have on a client. The psychologist and client will then be better equipped to work together to successfully identify relationally aggressive behaviours and devise ways of effectively dealing with the problem (Goldberg, 2009).

1.4.4. Summary

This chapter provides a background and context for the phenomenon under study. RA is portrayed as a covert, non-physical form of aggression that seems to be more prevalent among females than among males. The associations amongst RA and friendships, RA and popularity, and media portrayals of RA were explored. The significance of RA in the South African context and the gaps in the current research on aggression are also discussed, highlighting the need for qualitative research on adult samples in a non-Western context. In addition, there is a reflection on the implications of unchecked RA and the relevance of RA for the field of psychology. The next chapter focuses on the theoretical framework of the study and the current literature on RA.

1.4.5. Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this study is to explore RA from a South African female perspective.

The main research questions are as follows:

1. How is RA understood by young South African women?
2. What are some of the experiences they have had with RA?

The grounded theory approach has been selected to guide the undertaking of the study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

A discussion of the current literature on RA is presented in this chapter. According to O’Neil (2010), a literature review should identify gaps in the available literature on the topic, set up a theoretical framework for the study, and define and explain concepts relating to the study. In this review, the theoretical frameworks used to understand RA are discussed. An empirical review of the literature on RA is also provided.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

According to Lunsford (2014), there are no theories specifically formulated to explain RA. As a result, the same theoretical underpinnings used to understand physical aggression have influenced the understanding of RA. It is significant to note, though, that RA researchers commonly use the term “physical aggression” as a counterpoint to RA, in order to distinguish between overt and covert forms of aggression. While the term “RA” is used to describe non-physical, indirect and social forms of aggression, “physical aggression” is often used to delineate overt, direct forms of aggression (Lansford et al., 2012; McEvoy et al., 2003; Prinstein, Boergers & Vernberg, 2001).

For instance, Field et al. (2006) differentiate between these forms of aggression in the following manner:

In contrast to physical aggression, the use of relational and social aggression implies a lack of directness and overt aggression when girls encounter conflict, and instead social intelligence is used to manipulate relationships, damage the reputations of others or seek social vengeance. (p.4)

Researchers in the field of RA have made use of and adapted theoretical and conceptual models initially used to explain physical aggression (Michiels, Grietens, Onghena & Kuppens, 2008). Some of these theories include relational-cultural theory, a frustration-

aggression hypothesis associated with reactive forms of social aggression, resource control and social exchange theories, feminist theory, and socialisation theories.

Socialisation theories have been selected to guide this study because they are widely accepted and extensively used in the field of RA research (Pellegrini & Long, 2003). Two major socialisation theories that are used to understand RA have thus been selected for the current study: Social Role Theory (Eagly & Steffen, 1986) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). Although these theories are not recent, Field, Kolbert, Crothers and Hughes (2009) assert that they are still relevant and useful for understanding RA. The authors note that over the last four decades, gender-role expectations for females have become more flexible and girls now have more career, academic, economic and athletic opportunities than they did in the past. Conflicting messages about femininity, however, continue to exist. Gender-role socialisation therefore continues to play a significant role in female conflict and relationally aggressive behaviour (Field et al., 2009). Socialisation theories have also been selected because they resonate with the feminist perspective. Feminist interpretations are regarded as useful in understanding indirect forms of aggression such as RA (Goldberg, 2009). The selected theories are discussed in further detail below.

It is important to note that the theoretical framework has been used as part of the literature review in discussing how RA is understood. The theoretical framework aims to provide an anchor for the reader by engaging leading ideas, acknowledging prior theoretical works and positioning the new grounded theory study in relation to these theories (Charmaz, 2006).

2.1.1. Social Role Theory

Social role can be defined as “the expected behaviour associated with a status. Roles are performed according to social norms, shared rules that guide people’s behaviour” (Lindsey & Christy, 2011, p.2). Social roles are typically assigned according to gender. Gender refers to social, cultural, and psychological traits that are regarded as either “masculine” or “feminine” (Lindsey & Christy, 2011, p.4). Stereotypes (oversimplified conceptions that people share common traits) often become associated with gender roles.

From their early review, Eagly and Steffen (1986) suggest that the male gender role promotes aggression. Tough, violent and aggressive behaviour is expected of men. This is illustrated in

the frequently aggressive acts portrayed by male characters in popular culture. Men are regarded as more aggressive, assertive and competitive than women, and these qualities are also seen as more desirable in men.

In contrast, the female gender role focuses less on aggression and more on nurturing and caring for others. Research suggests that gender role expectancies are created through parenting practices (Pellegrini & Long, 2003). For example, boys and girls are expected by their parents to comply with the behaviours associated with “traditional” gender roles. Traditional roles assigned to boys tend to be associated with more physically aggressive and competitive behaviour, whereas girls are encouraged to be caring, with particular emphasis on interpersonal relationships. In addition, parents, teachers and peers react differently when boys engage in physical aggression than when girls do. Girls are condemned for making use of such actions, whilst boys are allowed and sometimes encouraged to do so. As a result of this, boys learn that aggression is an appropriate pattern of behavior, while girls are taught that it is inappropriate (Carlo, Raffaelli, Laible, & Meyer, 1999; Gilligan, 1982). These ideas have implications for the ways in which aggression is displayed amongst girls and boys. Since girls are denied the use of physical aggression, they turn to RA in order to express feelings of anger and frustration (Pellegrini & Long, 2003).

The social roles assigned to girls require them to adhere to traditional conceptualisations of feminine behaviour (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). They are expected to project a certain image through their dressing, the friends they associate with, and their attractions to members of the opposite sex. They are socially rewarded by peers and adults for following these norms and conducting themselves in appropriately “feminine” ways as objects of desire (Petre, 2008, p.14). More importantly, girls are expected to be nice at all times (Simmons, 2002).

As a result, girls who conform to traditional gender roles strive to maintain harmony in their interactions with people and avoid physical aggression at all costs. This can, however, lead to the use of RA in order to express negative emotions, resolve conflict, and assert authority over other females who do not comply with traditional gender role expectations (Kolbert, Field, Crothers & Schreiber, 2010). Social Role Theory suggests that RA is associated with perceived popularity, as girls who are perceived as popular adhere to the norms of idealised femininity. This restricts them from expressing negative emotions, such as anger, directly.

RA thus becomes the weapon that the popular girl wields in order to protect her immaculate image and maintain her power and invulnerability (Currie et al., 2007).

2.1.2. Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory is another major theory used to understand physical aggression and RA (Corwin, 2014). It is often used as a starting point for considering the development of RA (Michiels et al., 2008) and is regarded as one of the most influential theories of sex differences in aggression (Hess & Hagen, 2006).

Social Learning Theory parallels Social Role Theory, but focuses on the learning processes that facilitate the development of aggressive behaviour. It proposes that gender development is influenced by observational learning and modelling (Bandura, 1977). Information about gender roles is communicated by ‘models’ in the immediate environment such as parents, peers, teachers and the media. Children imitate the behavior of these models (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Bandura conducted several experiments in which children witnessed specific aggressive acts being carried out by a model. The children then imitated the aggressive behaviour they had seen. In the famous “bobo doll” experiment, children witnessed an actor hitting a bobo doll and began to imitate this behaviour (Bushman & Huesmann, 2012). Bandura also introduced the concept of vicarious learning in relation to aggression. He proposed that children were more likely to imitate models that had been rewarded for behaving aggressively (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Social Learning Theory suggests that reinforcement and punishment have an effect on learning. Behaviour that is positively reinforced will be repeated in the future, and behaviour that is negatively reinforced or punished will not be repeated (Corwin, 2004).

The assumption that behaviour is learned through observation, modelling and reinforcement or punishment can be applied to RA as well. According to Social Learning Theory, RA develops through observations of social models at home, at school, in the community, society, and the media (Botha, 2014). Parents, for example, are regarded as primary models of aggressive behaviour toward their children. Children learn RA by observing how parents deal with conflict (Hamilton, 2010). If parents use manipulative and maladaptive behaviours

to resolve conflict, children who observe this may enact the same type of behaviour in their own relationships with others. The occurrence of RA amongst females has been associated with girls observing female role models who avoid dealing with conflict directly and use relationally aggressive tactics such as gossiping and social exclusion to express negative emotions (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, Duriez, & Niemiec, 2008).

According to Social Learning Theory, when peers in the immediate environment are reinforced for their behaviour, the individual who observes the behaviour is more likely to emulate it (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Relationally aggressive acts are emulated if the perpetrator is regarded as popular, has many friends, and gains positive attention for carrying out such acts (Field et al., 2009). Girls who are perceived as popular are able to use their power and influence to practise RA without reproach. Peers who observe this behaviour learn that RA is acceptable, because it does not seem to carry any negative consequences (Botha, 2014). This behaviour is then imitated in order to gain acceptance and approval from popular girls (Field et al., 2009).

From the above, it would appear that there is a link between perceived popularity and RA. The majority of studies conducted thus far, however, have focused on the link between perceived popularity and overt forms of aggression, such as physical and verbal aggression. There is a need for further research to explore the association between popularity and RA (Rose et al., 2004). The present study has attempted to address this gap in the literature by including a question in the interview schedule pertaining to popularity.

2.1.3. The Feminist Perspective

Feminist interpretations concur with the tenets of both Social Role Theory and Social Learning Theory. Feminist researchers posit that RA has developed as a result of the patriarchy inherent in society. Patriarchy refers to a system which is male-dominated (Lindsey & Christy, 2011). Traditional social roles enable men to be in a position of power and control, and to use physical aggression as a means of achieving dominance over others (Button & Gealt, 2010).

Feminist researchers such as Currie et al. (2009) and Goldberg (2009) also highlight the fact that aggression in boys is sometimes positively reinforced and rewarded, while physical aggression in girls is almost always negatively reinforced or punished. As Social Learning Theory suggests, behaviour that is positively reinforced will be repeated in the future, and behaviour that is negatively reinforced or punished will be avoided in future (Corwin, 2004). Girls thus begin to associate shame and anxiety with the open expression of anger. They learn to imitate the behaviour of other females who engage in covert means of expressing negative emotions. This type of behaviour is less likely to result in negative social consequences, as it is more difficult to detect (Goldberg, 2009).

Embedded in our culture are socially constructed ideas about girlhood as a way of being (Ryalls, 2011). These ideas are often contradictory. Girls are expected to be attractive but not obsessed with appearance; desirable to males but not sexually initiative; they must be independent but also avoid isolation; and so on (Currie et al., 2007). Characteristics such as “cruel” and “out of control” are used to describe female aggression and are often accepted as the truth about girlhood, instead of as socially constructed ideas (Ryalls, 2011, p.145).

These socially constructed ideas about girlhood are illustrated in evolving media portrayals over the last twenty-five years. In the 1990s, a common discourse was the “Reviving Ophelia” discourse (Ringrose, 2006; Ryalls, 2011). It suggested that when girls reached adolescence they entered into a period of crisis. They became withdrawn and developed low-self-esteem and body-image issues. More importantly, adolescent girls seemed to lose their authentic sense of self in order to conform to societal expectations of what they should be like. A number of films detailed the phenomenon of the popular yet vulnerable girl, who struggled with the demands and pressures placed on her (Ryalls, 2011). The discourse carried the message that girls were vulnerable and needed rescuing (Currie et al., 2009).

In the late 1990s, a new discourse known as the “Girl Power” discourse gained attention. It signified the idea that girls could be confident and independent; that they were powerful and capable of achieving their goals. However, Girl Power was also used by adults as a means of rescuing girls who were regarded as being in trouble. Here, again, the implied message seemed to be that girls were at risk and needed to be saved (Currie et al., 2009).

In recent years, the “Girl Power” discourse has been replaced by the “Mean Girl” discourse. There has been a shift from the image of a universal vulnerable girl to the image of a universal mean girl, and girlhood is now regulated by a continuum that moves from nice to mean (Ringrose, 2006). The Mean Girl discourse implies that female success and power lead to manipulation and covert aggression. Girls’ competitive and relationally aggressive behaviour is interpreted as a sign of over-empowerment, and of girls “becoming ‘too much’ like their male counterparts” (Currie et al., 2009, p.104).

2.2. Empirical Review

A review of the existing literature on aggression indicates that there has been a popular focus on the physical aggression that occurs predominantly amongst males. According to Hadley (2004), the majority of literature prior to 1990 reflects “a longstanding, presumed connection of aggression with men and boys” (p.333).

Non-physical aggression and aggression amongst females only gained significant attention in the early 1990s, when a group of Swedish researchers led by KajBjorkqvist began questioning whether males were more aggressive than females (Ringrose, 2006). The researchers investigated issues of motivation to aggress. Their laboratory studies found that females behaved as aggressively as males when they were not in danger of being recognised. Bjorkvist’s team concluded that women are just as aggressive as men. Their research provided a challenge to the male bias inherent in studies of aggression, and the myth that women were passive in relation to men (Ringrose, 2006).

Since then, researchers have begun to pay more attention to non-physical, covert forms of aggression, such as RA. Studies on RA have been led by pioneers in the field, such as Crick and Grotpeter (1995), who conducted studies on RA amongst children and distinguished between RA and physical aggression as separate constructs. Other researchers such as Loudin, Loukas and Robinson (2003) have drawn on Crick and Grotpeter’s work to explore RA amongst other populations, such as college students. Researchers have also focused on gender differences in the use of RA (Crick et al., 1999; Nelson et al., 2007). They have examined the links between RA and female friendships (Crothers et al., 2005; Goldberg et al., 2011; Huntley & Owens, 2006) and RA and popularity (Currie et al, 2007; Rose et al, 2004). Diverse measures such as observation, peer nomination and self-reports have been used to

assess RA. These measures are mainly quantitative in nature (Kotze, 2007). Details are presented in the sections that follow.

2.2.1. Research on Young Samples

The current research on RA focuses predominantly on children and adolescents between the ages of thirteen to eighteen. According to Crick et al. (2004), two common measures of RA amongst children and adolescents are naturalistic and semi-structured observation. In naturalistic observation, the researcher observes a specific child for five to eight sessions (during two to three months of observation). The child's interaction with peers is carefully observed. Behaviour that relates to aggression and victimisation is recorded. In semi-structured observation, children are required to complete a specific task such as a colouring task. The tasks are videotaped and the researcher later codes them for aggressive behaviours. Observation is regarded as a suitable measure for use amongst children, as they tend to be less self-conscious than adults (Crick et al., 2004). This type of measure seems to provide confirmation for Kotze's (2007) suggestion that most of the research on non-physical aggression amongst young samples is quantitative in nature.

Self-report measures are also used to measure RA amongst children and adolescents. The Olweus Bullying Questionnaire, for example, is one of the most commonly used measures of bullying in children. Its definition of bullying encompasses both physical aggression and RA. The questionnaire consists of 40 questions that assess the levels of bullying and victimisation within a school. It also focuses on common locations for bullying and students' attitudes towards bullying (Corwin, 2014; Olweus, 2007). Corwin (2014) points out that although the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire is a comprehensive measure of RA, it is time-consuming and is intended only for students.

Peer nomination scales have also been widely used to assess RA in children. According to Crick and Grotpeter (1995), this is because RA behaviour is covert in nature, making it difficult to observe and evaluate by those outside the peer group, such as researchers.

Research on young samples has focused on gender as a variable in aggression research. It has also revealed associations between RA and social roles, RA and friendships, and RA and popularity.

Gender As a Variable in Aggression Research

Crick and Grotpeter (1995) developed a peer nomination measure consisting of 19 items to assess RA, overt aggression, prosocial behaviour, and isolation in a sample of 491 children from grades three to six. Participants were required to nominate up to three classmates that displayed these characteristics for each of the items. The findings of the study suggested that both girls and boys were reported to engage in aggressive behaviour, but in different ways. Girls were seen as favouring the use of RA, while boys tended to engage in more overt forms of aggression, such as physical aggression and verbal aggression. Crick and Grotpeter's study was regarded as ground-breaking in the field of RA research (McEvoy et al., 2003).

Crick et al. (1999) also developed scales to assess peer and teacher perceptions of physical aggression, RA, and prosocial behaviour amongst preschool children. These were called the Children's Social Behavior Scales and the Children's Social Experiences Scales. A sample of 129 children, aged three to five years, and their teachers, participated in the study. Gender differences were observed, with boys appearing more likely to be victims of physical aggression and girls more likely to be the victims of RA. The results also indicated that victims of physical aggression and RA experienced negative consequences such as low social status and difficult relationships within their peer groups. Crick et al. (2004) regard these scales as reliable measures of RA and note that peer and teacher reports have been used extensively to measure RA in early childhood.

Crick and Nelson (2002) conducted a study on physical aggression and RA in a sample of 496 primary school children from small towns in the United States. Aggression was measured using the Friend Relational and Physical Aggression subscales of the Friendship Qualities Measure. The Friend Relational Aggression subscale contains four self-report items which examine the degree to which a child is victimised by RA. The Friend Physical Aggression subscale consists of three self-report items which examine the degree to which a child is victimised by physical aggression. The findings revealed that significantly greater levels of RA were reported in girls' friendships than in boys' friendships. The authors realised that if they had only examined physical aggression, the occurrence of RA amongst 71.4% of girls

would have gone unreported. Similar studies have also found that RA was more prevalent amongst girls than amongst boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988; Remillard & Lamb, 2005).

Social Roles and RA

Research has also revealed that social roles have an impact on the use of aggression. Crick, Ostrov, Appleyard, Jansen and Casas (2004) propose that physical aggression in girls decreases while RA increases as they develop a greater understanding of social role expectations. The authors suggest that since the traditional feminine social role discourages overt aggression, girls turn to RA as an alternative.

To measure the association between RA and traditional social roles, Crothers et al. (2005) conducted a study amongst 52 female students from a high school in the United States. The Relational Aggression Scale (RAS) and the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) were administered to participants during semi-structured interviews. The RAS is a one-item, self-report, Likert scale instrument that measures the use of RA in power and conflict. The BSRI consists of 60 self-report items that explore instrumental and expressive gender role descriptors. The results indicated that participants who identified with a traditional feminine gender role were more likely to use RA than those who did not identify with a traditional feminine gender role. In addition, the girls' tendency to either avoid conflict completely or use covert means to address it was encouraged by adults. These findings seem to provide confirmation for Social Role Theory (Eagly & Steffen, 1986), which proposes that traditional social roles require females to maintain harmony in their interactions with people and avoid physical aggression at all costs. Adults discourage girls from engaging in physical aggression, whilst boys are allowed and sometimes encouraged to do so. Thus, girls are taught that engaging in this type of behaviour is inappropriate, and they turn to RA as a covert means of expressing negative emotions and resolving conflict (Kolbert et al., 2010).

Friendships and RA

Research has also been conducted to measure the association between friendships and RA.

Remillard and Lamb (2005) conducted a study which explored how girls coped with RA in close friendships. Ninety-eight female students from grades 6-12 participated in the study. The participants were asked to describe an incident in which a friend had perpetrated an act of RA against them. Questions were then asked about the nature of the friendship with the aggressor. Finally, participants completed the Revised Ways of Coping Scale to indicate the strategies they had used to cope with the incident. The findings revealed that 40% of participants remained friends with the aggressor. In addition, the closer the friendship, the more painful was the experience of RA. The study found that girls coped with RA in friendships by engaging in wishful thinking, self-blame and by keeping to themselves. According to Remillard and Lamb (2005), the findings suggest that due to the intimate nature of female friendships, RA is “extremely effective in hurting a girl when it involves a conflict with a close friend” (p. 226). The authors mention the need for future research exploring acts of RA in close female friendships. The present study attempts to address this need by asking participants about how they would react to a hypothetical act of RA in their friendships.

Field et al. (2006) examined the roles of RA and social aggression in adolescent female friendships. The sample comprised of 28 female students from a predominantly White high school in the United States. The participants were required to complete a questionnaire that included demographic questions, as well as 16 open-ended prompts designed to identify how the participants described RA and social aggression, how they handled conflict in their friendships, and how they interpreted adult expectations with regard to conflict management. The results indicated that engaging in RA was one of the strategies used to handle conflict in adolescent female friendships. The authors suggested that the use of RA by adolescent females could be a preliminary attempt to cope with negative emotions that would gradually evolve into more effective ways of handling conflict in friendships.

Popularity and RA

In their investigation into relationships amongst girls at several Canadian schools, Currie et al. (2007) found that perceived popularity was uniformly identified with being mean and aggressive. The sample included 71 girls between the ages of 11 and 16. Semi-structured interviews exploring participants’ experiences at school and their relationships among peers were conducted. The findings revealed that meanness operated within the context of

“emphasised femininity”: universal standards of appropriate feminine behaviour which dictated that girls should maintain a certain image and compete with one another for male attention (Currie et al., 2007, p.31). Girls who were perceived as popular conformed to the notion of emphasised femininity. They attained power through their ability to govern the boundaries of acceptable femininity. Meanness was carried out as an exercise of this power (Currie et al., 2007).

Currie et al.’s (2007) findings were consistent with previous research linking perceived popularity to RA. In order to measure interpersonal conflicts among adolescents, Xie, Swift, Cairns and Cairns (2002) conducted a study amongst 475 learners in grade 7. The relationship between perceived popularity and four types of aggression; physical, verbal, relational and social, was measured using participants’ narratives of interpersonal conflicts. The authors found a significant positive relationship between perceived popularity and RA.

Rose et al. (2004) conducted two studies using a peer nomination measure to assess the relationship between perceived popularity, overt aggression and RA. In the first study, the sample consisted of 607 boys and girls from grades three, five, seven and nine. The second study involved 2038 boys and girls, also from the same grades. Perceived popularity was defined as being “well-known, attractive, athletic, having desirable possessions, being accepted by others who are perceived as popular, and being desirable to the opposite sex” (Rose et al., 2004, p. 379). Overt aggression was defined as direct physical and verbal aggression. RA was defined as acts such as exclusion, spreading rumours and threats of ending a friendship. The first hypothesis tested was that RA was a positive predictor of perceived popularity. The second hypothesis tested was that perceived popularity, in turn, predicted RA. To test these hypotheses, a peer nomination measure with 16 items assessing the relationship between perceived popularity and aggression was used. The findings confirmed that there was a significant relationship between RA and perceived popularity for both genders. For girls in particular, Rose et al. (2004) found that the relationship was bidirectional. Acts of RA were used to attain perceived popularity, and perceived popularity predicted further acts of RA in order to maintain this social status.

Summary of Research on Young Samples

As can be seen from the above, the majority of the current measures of RA were developed for use amongst early and middle childhood populations. Murray-Close, Ostrov, Nelson, Crick and Coccaro (2010) assert that there is a lack of reliable and valid measures to assess RA in adulthood. There is also a reliance on observations, peer nominations, and teacher-report methods. This poses a challenge for researchers wanting to measure RA amongst adults and in non-group contexts. In addition, given that RA research has mainly focused on children, research on adult perceptions and reactions to RA tends to focus on the parents and teachers of learners from preschool to grade 12 (Fifield, 2010).

The studies described above also reveal the impact of RA on the well-being of young people. Rose et al. (2004) assert that victims of RA are at risk for a number of internalising and externalising problems. The authors also suggest that the self-esteem of the victim is affected if the perpetrator is perceived as respected and popular. In their study on friendships and RA, Remillard and Lamb (2005) found that victims of RA tended to use negative ways of coping, such as engaging in wishful thinking, self-blame and social withdrawal. Moreover, Field et al. (2006) propose that continuous engagement in or exposure to RA can impact negatively on the social and psychological development of adolescent females, leading to maladaptive behaviours that can continue into adulthood. These implications point to the relevance of RA for psychology, as well as the need for further research in order to gain more information about the problem and develop effective interventions.

2.2.2. Research on Adult Samples

There is limited research on RA in stages beyond adolescence. As a result, the scope and prevalence of RA amongst young adult samples remains relatively understudied (Krueger, Rao, Salzer & Saucerman, 2011). The limited research on RA amongst adults has tended to treat it as a correlate of negative behaviours. Rating scales as well as self-report measures have been used to measure RA amongst adults. Delgado (2007) suggests that self-reports are a superior measure of RA as they are less time-consuming than other measures, easier to administer, and allow participants to discuss their own ideas, feelings and experiences.

As with research on young samples, research on adult samples has revealed gender as a variable in aggression research. It has also revealed the negative effects of RA on adult samples and implied that there are associations between RA and psychological disorders.

Gender As a Variable in Aggression Research

Nelson et al. (2007) used self-reports to measure aggression in emerging adulthood. The sample comprised of 134 university students between the ages of 18-25. The study explored participants' beliefs regarding the specific form that aggression takes in male-male, male-female, female-male, and female-female aggressor/target dyads. The results indicated that direct verbal and physical aggression was seen as the most common form of aggression in male-to-male interactions. For female-to-female interactions, RA was selected as the most common form of aggression.

Krueger et al. (2011) conducted a study to measure the prevalence and impact of RA amongst 139 female undergraduate students. The researchers used a survey with seven questions to determine the prevalence of RA and attitudes toward it. The questions examined the frequency of relationally aggressive acts across a range of common contexts, the participants' roles as perpetrators and victims, whether they experienced guilt when engaging in RA, how they reacted to relationally aggressive acts and the perceived impact of RA. The findings suggested that RA was normative among females in late adolescence and young adulthood.

Research conducted by Hess and Hagen (2006) provides support for these findings. The study examined sex differences in indirect aggression amongst young adults. The sample consisted of 255 undergraduate students, both male and female. The participants were asked to read a hypothetical, aggression-evoking scenario in which a classmate of the same sex was overheard making false accusations about the participant. The participants were then asked about how they would respond to these allegations. Retaliatory responses were measured using 10-point Likert scales. The results implied that there were distinct sex differences in response to aggression. Male participants indicated a stronger desire than female participants to retaliate physically. Female participants indicated a stronger desire to retaliate with acts of RA such as gossiping or destroying the classmate's reputation.

Miller-Ott and Kelly (2013) explored the communication of RA in the college environment. A sample of thirty female students participated in qualitative interviews. The participants were provided with a definition of RA and then asked to discuss their observations and experiences of RA. The findings suggested that RA was a frequent occurrence amongst young adult females. In multiple instances, women were involved in RA as victims, perpetrators or observers. RA was depicted as normative and acceptable amongst female college students.

The Effects of RA

Werner and Crick (1999) developed a 24-item peer-nomination measure to assess RA and social-psychological adjustment in a sample of 225 undergraduate students. In accordance with previous research, the findings indicated that RA was associated with higher levels of peer rejection and antisocial behaviour. RA was also associated with features of Borderline Personality Disorder, as well as difficulty with anger management, increased conflict in relationships, and self-destructive behaviour. One gender difference observed was that for women, engagement in RA was associated with symptoms of bulimia.

Loudin et al. (2003) used an adapted version of Crick and Grotpeter's peer nomination scale to measure the effects of social anxiety and empathy on RA. The sample consisted of 300 college students. Empathy was measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which comprises of four subscales: Perspective Taking, Fantasy, Empathetic Concern, and Personal Distress. Social anxiety was measured using the Social-Evaluative Anxiety (SEA) scale, which consists of two subscales: Social Avoidance and Distress, and Fear of Negative Evaluation. Loudin et al. (2003) found that college students who experienced social anxiety displayed higher levels of RA. This can be explained by the fact that people with social anxiety are concerned with being evaluated negatively by others. RA behaviour is sometimes used as a reaction to perceived negative evaluation. Loudin et al. (2003) also discovered that people with lower empathetic concern exhibited higher levels of RA. The authors point out, however, that it is not clear whether empathy and social anxiety precede RA, or if RA leads to lower levels of empathy and increased social anxiety. Further research is required in order to reach definite conclusions.

Summary of Research on Adult Samples

From the above, it appears evident that measures such as peer nominations and self-reports have been used to examine RA amongst adult samples. The studies described above reveal a predominant focus on quantitative measures to assess RA. This can be regarded as a limitation of the current research in the field. Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck (2010) suggest that there is a crucial need to conduct research on RA from a qualitative perspective. The present study has therefore been developed using a qualitative approach. The measures described above also seem to confirm that there are gender differences in the use of RA and physical aggression. RA appears to be more prevalent amongst females, while physical aggression appears to be more widely used by males. For this reason, the current study focuses on RA from a female perspective.

Further, it appears that the majority of research conducted thus far focuses on child and adolescent samples. Given that emerging adulthood is regarded as “a unique developmental period wherein relationships become increasingly important and intimate”, it is surprising to note that there are very few studies which explore RA in emerging adulthood (Nelson, Springer, Nelson & Bean, 2008, p.368). Brock et al. (2014) also point out the need for research at a university level. The university setting brings large numbers of young adults in regular contact with one another. In addition to the traditional lecture-style teaching approaches, there are also student-centred approaches which require collaboration and group-work. The dynamics of these social groups result in opportunities in which RA can occur (Brock et al., 2014). In addition, young adults often do not have a fully formulated sense of self, resulting in heightened sensitivity to the perceptions of others and a desire for peer approval. This can prove problematic when trying to integrate with new social groups that emerge after high school (Krueger et al., 2011). Goldberg et al. (2011) add that as females approach adulthood, their social intelligence increases, resulting in a greater capacity for manipulating others through the use of RA. This study has attempted to address these gaps by exploring RA from the perspective of female university students.

There also appears to be a popular focus on white, middle class Western populations, and a paucity of research amongst young adults in diverse contexts (Goldberg, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2011). Although significant progress has been made in the understanding of RA since its

initial conceptualisation in the 1990s, there is still a need for further research from different perspectives and contexts. This study has therefore been conducted in a diverse South African context.

2.3. Summary

This chapter contains a review of the extant literature on RA amongst young samples, as well as adult samples. It appears that although significant progress has been made in understanding RA in recent decades, certain areas remain largely unexamined, such as qualitative research and research amongst adult, non-Western samples. It seems evident that further research is required in order to enhance our understandings of RA. Hadley (2004) provides a concise summary of the current state of research in the field: “Research on and understanding of girls’ experience of aggression, with all its ambivalence, as well as its social and personal significance, has only begun” (p. 348). Research on the effects of RA which is unchecked points to a need for psychological intervention. Further insight into the phenomenon of RA could lead to the development of successful intervention strategies. The following chapter describes the methodology of the present study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore RA from the perspective of a select sample of South African students. The constructivist grounded theory method advocated by Charmaz (2006) was used to conduct the primary research. The research design, sampling technique, data collection procedures and data analysis method are in keeping with this method..A discussion on these aspects will be covered in this chapter, as well as the trustworthiness of the study and the ethical considerations that were encountered during the research process.

3.2. Research Design

A research design is a plan or blueprint for conducting research. It should match the aim and course of the research (Ulin, Robinson, Tolley & McNeill, 2002). The aim of the study was to explore relational aggression from the perspective of female university students. In accordance with this aim, and in order to achieve a depth of understanding, a qualitative research design was chosen. Qualitative research seeks to describe, understand and explore phenomena in the social and cultural context (Ulin et al., 2002). It is concerned with the subjective meanings assigned to human experiences (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002; Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007).

In contrast with quantitative research, which uses a set of structured questions to elicit categorized data, qualitative research aims to elicit a “thick” and detailed description of the phenomenon being studied (Jackson et al., 2007, p.23). This approach is described as emergent because it is flexible and continually evolving (Fossey et al., 2002). Participants are regarded as actively involved in the production of knowledge and information, and the researcher’s role in the entire research process is openly acknowledged (Ulin et al., 2002). Qualitative research is often inductive. Patterns, themes, and conclusions emerge from the data, instead of being influenced by pre-existing information on the topic (Bowen, 2006).

Accordingly, an inductive, exploratory approach has been selected for the present study. The exploratory approach aims to investigate a phenomenon about which little is known and to

generate hypotheses or theories for further research (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). This approach has been selected because there seems to be a paucity of research on RA from the perspective of young adult South Africans.

In exploratory research, grounded theory is generally used to develop hypotheses or models from the data (Charmaz, 2006). According to Charmaz (2006), “Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (p.2). It is an inductive method of analysis for generating theories or models from the data itself. Data is systematically collected and interpreted as the study develops (Mavetera & Kroeze, 2009).

Grounded theory has evolved over the years. It was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), in response to the predominantly positivist focus of research. Grounded theory was designed to guide researchers in discovering theories from research. Glaser and Strauss laid the foundation for a very different and advanced way of conducting social research, with its own distinctive goals and methodology (Charmaz, 2008; Egan, 2002). They provided a set of flexible guidelines for researchers to construct their methodologies. The aim was to allow method and content to emerge from the research process instead of being influenced by preconceived ideas (Charmaz, 2008).

After Glaser and Strauss’s initial conceptualisation, grounded theory developed in different directions (Cho & Lee, 2014). Strauss and Corbin (1994), for example, developed their own variation of grounded theory, resulting in the formation of two classic or traditional schools of Grounded Theory: the Glaserian School and the Straussian School. The main differences between the two schools of thought concerned the direction and execution of the primary research. Glaser, for example, suggested that researchers should begin with an open mind that is not influenced by previous research on the topic. Strauss and Corbin, however, allowed researchers to gain a basic understanding of literature around the topic (Jones & Alony, 2011). Glaser also encouraged openness and flexibility in data analysis, whilst Strauss and Corbin outlined prescriptive methods for analysing data. Glaser’s method was criticised for being vague and difficult for novice researchers to follow. Strauss and Corbin’s method was criticised for being too rigid and prescriptive (Cho & Lee, 2014).

A constructivist approach to grounded theory was later developed by Charmaz (2006). It differed from traditional grounded theory in that it highlighted the ways in which the researcher's interaction and involvement with participants impacted on theoretical development. Charmaz's (2006) approach used the components of traditional grounded theory, but did not support its objectivist stance. It retained the scientific rigour of traditional grounded theory, whilst also encouraging openness, reflexivity and empathy towards participants. As a result, emerging theories in the constructivist grounded theory are interpretive representations of reality as opposed to objective representations (Ford, 2010).

Constructivist grounded theory was selected to guide the present study. This method seemed to be appropriate for the current study, as the study followed an inductive approach and one of its objectives was to explore a model for understanding RA in the South African context. Constructivism is also consistent with the ontology of the feminist perspective, which forms part of this study's theoretical framework. Both feminism and constructivism depict reality as socially constructed through language, rituals, norms, rules and institutions (Locher & Prügl, 2001). The constructivist grounded theory method was also chosen for its flexibility and emphasis on reflexivity. For the novice researcher, the guidelines provided by Charmaz are detailed, clear and easy to understand (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006).

According to Pidgeon and Henwood (1997), "the goal of qualitative research is to build "complex and comprehensive theoretical systems from a suitably large corpus of data" (p. 266). For the student researcher, however, this goal is hindered by constraints such as time and resources. Pidgeon and Henwood (1997) thus propose a range of goals that can be achieved through grounded theory analysis. These include taxonomy development, local theoretical reflection and 'fully-fledged' grounded theory. Taxonomy development comprises of building a classification of concepts found in the data, as well as identifying their relative importance to the research question. Local theoretical reflection comprises of the intermediate stage of analysis and outlines four alternatives that can be followed: *conceptual development*; in which a limited sub-set of related categories is used; *cycles of interpretation*, in which the focus is on one or two core categories to suggest new interpretations and samples of data; *specific cases*, in which data from a single participant or a few contrasting interviews is used; and *theoretical comparison*, in which comparisons are made between the emerging analysis and existing theories. Fully-fledged grounded theory comprises of

explaining phenomena, categorising the relevant phenomena into concepts, explaining the relationships between concepts and developing a framework for making predictions.

For the present study, local theoretical reflection was selected as the goal of data analysis. Specifically, the aim was to achieve conceptual development, by focusing on the fit between the categories and the data, the level of abstraction of the categories and the initial relationships between categories. Conceptual development was regarded as a suitable goal for a study of this scope and nature.

3.4. Sample Description

Qualitative sampling aims to elicit a depth of information. As opposed to the quantitative approach, it is less concerned with obtaining a representative sample (Fossey et al., 2002; Jackson et al., 2002). As a result, the sample size is often small (Ulin et al, 2002). Qualitative sampling is an ongoing process that is linked with the emergent nature of the research (Fossey et al., 2002).

Charmaz (2006) encourages the use of initial sampling as well as theoretical sampling. The criteria for initial sampling differ from the criteria for theoretical sampling. Initial sampling begins with a single case and provides a starting point from which to begin gathering data until categories can be developed. Theoretical sampling is conducted after the data from the initial sample has been analysed and developed into tentative categories. It enables the researcher to fill in the properties of the categories and refine them. Charmaz (2006) describes the difference between initial sampling and theoretical sampling in the following manner: “Initial sampling in grounded theory is where you start, whereas theoretical sampling directs you where to go” (p. 100).

Initial sampling requires the establishment of sampling criteria for potential participants (Charmaz, 2006). For the purposes of the current study, the following criteria were used: participants had to be South African, female, and above the age of 18. South African students were chosen because the study aimed to explore RA in a South African context. University students are also situated in an environment which promotes socialisation with others, making it a good setting to observe RA. Young South African women were chosen because in terms of gender, RA is believed to be far more prevalent amongst females than amongst

males (Goldberg, 2009). The selection of age group was motivated by the need to include young adults in the study.

Potential participants who met the above criteria were approached at a university in Durban and the research topic was described to them. A diverse sample of potential participants was approached for this study, because one of the criticisms levelled at previous RA research is the use of mainly homogeneous samples (Ryalls, 2011). From the potential participants, the first case selected was Nadia, a 21-year old Indian student who had indicated an interest in the study and a willingness to participate. The data collected from Nadia's interview was immediately transcribed and analysed. It provided a guideline for focusing the subsequent data collection.

Other initial sampling participants were selected from those who met the sampling criteria and indicated an interest in the study. Snowball sampling was used to obtain a sufficient number of participants. This is a non-probability method which involves asking one participant to recommend other individuals who will be able to provide insight on the research topic (Handcock & Gile, 2011). The initial sampling phase was concluded after a total of 13 participants had been interviewed, as it was believed that sufficient data had been collected to obtain rich and detailed descriptions of RA. Table 1 below represents the socio-demographic characteristics of the initial sampling participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of each participant.

Table 1: Characteristics of Initial Sampling Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race
1. Nadia	21	Indian
2. Zanele	20	African
3. Jayshree	21	Indian
4. Priyanka	20	Indian
5. Ayesha	19	Indian
6. Danielle	21	White
7. Katlego	21	African
8. Maryam	21	Indian
9. Diya	22	Indian
10. Ayanda	20	African
11. Daphne	20	Coloured
12. Dineo	19	African
13. Arya	19	Indian

After the initial phases of data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling was conducted to further develop and refine the tentative categories. Three participants from the same university were selected for these additional interviews, using the same criteria from the initial sampling phase. The theoretical sampling process is described in further detail in chapter 4.

In accordance with the purpose of the study, which was to explore RA from the perspective of young South African women, the participants in both sampling phases were women. As the study was located in a university context, they were between the ages of 19-25 and were pursuing tertiary qualifications. The majority of students who agreed to participate were Indian, with the rest being Black, Coloured and White. In terms of race, the sample was not as diverse as it had been hoped. Nonetheless, there were indications of diversity in the socio-economic, religious and cultural backgrounds of the participants.

3.5. Data Collection

Data was collected in the form of semi-structured individual interviews. Interviews were chosen because of their potential to compile detailed narratives and obtain rich or “thick” descriptions of data (Charmaz, 2006, p.14). With regard to RA, Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck (2010) found that conducting interviews about participants’ personal experiences provided a more in-depth understanding of RA in all its forms. In addition, by using interviews instead of focus groups, it was hoped that the subtle pressures that often arise amongst girls would be avoided and that participants would feel more comfortable sharing their experiences.

The interviews were conducted in a room in the Psychology Department which was rarely used by others and thus allowed for minimal disruption. Before the interviews commenced, I introduced myself to each participant and briefly described the research topic to them. They were reassured that the interviews would remain confidential and anonymous (they would be given pseudonyms). Furthermore, their responses would be treated with the utmost respect and sensitivity. Each participant was asked to read the informed consent form (Appendix 2) and sign it once they understood the requirements completely. Any questions or concerns that they had were addressed before the data collection procedure began.

At the beginning of each individual interview, film clips that explained RA were shown to the participant. The purpose of this was two-fold. Firstly, it was hoped that the participants would gain a better understanding of RA after viewing these clips. Secondly, Jackson et al. (2007) point out that it can be useful to observe how participants respond to a particular stimulus. When the topic being discussed is of a sensitive nature as in the case of RA, it can be difficult for participants to initially open up about their experiences. Showing them a stimulus can provide a way to prompt reflection and conversation (Jackson et al., 2007). In her study on “Relational Aggression in the College Environment”, Delgado (2011) used two film clips, along with individual interviews to explore students’ perceptions of RA. This enabled the participants to express their feelings about the relationally aggressive acts depicted in the clips, and stimulated recollections of their own experiences of RA.

The first participant, Nadia, was shown a short clip from a televised interview with Dr Erika Holiday and Dr Joan Rosenberg, psychologists who wrote the book *Mean Girls, Meaner*

Women (2009). In hindsight, however, it did not explain RA very well, as Nadia expressed some confusion around what the term meant. The following excerpt illustrates this confusion:

Saajida: *Can you describe your experiences with RA?*

Nadia: *Relationally?*

Saajida: *Yes, relationally.*

Nadia: *I'm sure I have experienced it but I can't pinpoint a situation now... uh apparently yesterday there was an argument that took place at Veg Cuisine between the two workers [laughs]. It ended up in a scenario where one hit the other over the head with a frying pan and sauce splattered everywhere [laughs].*

Saajida: *Okay...*

Nadia: *So if I was there I would probably have mentioned that, but be the fact is that it was hearsay so I can't talk about that. Uh girls, uh yah, sometimes girls are aggressive to other girls in private when they know that they can victimize someone without much difficulty-difficulty coming from the fact that others would confront her and ask or back someone up or support her whatever maybe the case.*

Saajida: *So is it easier to attack someone when they are alone?*

Nadia: *Yah*

Saajida: *Why?*

Nadia: *Uh there is no support from friends it's easier, I guess...um I can't really think of any situation where someone has been aggressive... uh when you say aggressive, would you include slang remarks?*

Saajida: *Yes, it can even be body language, it can be rolling eyes, it can be ignoring somebody, backbiting, gossiping, writing notes about another girl.*

Nadia: *Uh no not really... maybe I just turn a blind eye to these things. Maybe I just don't notice it.*

This excerpt suggested that perhaps Nadia did not understand the concept of “RA” clearly, indicating that the clips had not fulfilled the intended purpose. In subsequent interviews, this clip was therefore replaced by an interview with Rachel Simmons and a scene from the film adaptation of her book, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (Simmons, 2002). As Simmons is regarded as an authority on the subject of RA (Ryalls, 2011), this was deemed a more appropriate choice. Furthermore, Simmons’ research has been widely drawn on in the literature review section of this study.

The information obtained from the first interview was also used to develop and refine the interview guide. According to Charmaz (2006), the grounded theory method cautions against the use of preconceived, structured interview schedules. The interview schedule should develop from the initial interviews. The author notes, however, that for the novice researcher, an open-ended interview guide can be useful in providing some form of structure for the interviews, helping the researcher to avoid using loaded questions and forcing responses into narrow categories. An open-ended interview guide can also prevent the researcher from becoming distracted and missing important insights during the interview:

Having an interview guide with well-planned open-ended questions and ready probes can increase your confidence and permit you to concentrate on what the person is saying. Otherwise you may miss obvious points to explore because you become distracted by what to ask next and how to ask it. Subsequently, you may ask a series of 'do you' questions that cut off exploring the topic. At worst, your line of questioning can slip into an interrogation. Both defeat the purpose of conducting an intensive interview. Interviewing takes skill, but you can learn how to do it (Charmaz, 2006, p.29).

Accordingly, I developed a preliminary set of questions, developed from the literature on RA, to guide the initial interviews. The questions were intended to be as broad and open-ended as possible, to enable participants to convey their own understandings and experiences of RA. The questions were also flexible in order to accommodate changes as data collection progressed.

As the data collection progressed, I began to analyse the data simultaneously. Consequently, the focus of the interviews was narrowed, in order to generate a deeper exploration of the emerging codes and categories. I did not alter the initial questions, but added probes to each question. Probes are designed to elicit discussion on each area and to clarify and explore the developing codes and categories (Berg, Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2010). This process is illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Interview Guide

General Questions	Probes
<p>1. What do you understand by “RA” and “mean girls”?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think about the clips we’ve just watched? • What are the first thoughts that come to mind? • How would you describe RA? • How did it feel to watch RA being enacted in the film clips? • Who, in your opinion, is a “mean girl”? Please describe an example of a mean girl. • What do you think are the reasons for her behaviour?
<p>2. Can you describe your experiences with RA?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let’s discuss some of your experiences in school. Have you ever witnessed or experienced RA in school? • Who were the perpetrators of RA? • Who were the victims? • How did the popular girls in your school behave? • How is RA carried out at university? Have you witnessed or experienced RA at university?
<p>3. How does RA affect female friendships?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What, in your opinion, is a healthy friendship? • How would you describe an unhealthy friendship? • What have your friendships with other girls been like? • Have you ever had a friendship that became disrupted in any way? Please explain. • How do you deal with conflict in a friendship? For example, if you found out that a friend was talking about you behind your back, how would you react? • How have your friendships changed since entering university?
<p>4. What have you learned from your experiences with RA?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What, in your opinion, causes people to engage in RA? • What would you say to someone who is experiencing RA? • What can be done to address the problem of RA?

Most of the interviews were included for analysis. However, there were two interviews conducted in the initial phase of data collection which could not be used as the voice recorder had not worked properly and these interviews could thus not be transcribed.

In the theoretical sampling phase, the interview questions generally remained the same. The additional interviews focused on the gaps identified in the emerging categories, in order to refine these categories. For example, the additional interviews attempted to uncover the participants' own, subjective definitions of RA. In the initial interviews, I felt that these conceptualisations had not been explored fully and had been influenced by the film clips that the participants had watched. The additional interviews also directly explored the link between popularity and RA, by asking participants the following question: 'What do you think is the association between mean girls and popularity?'

3.6. Addressing Quality in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is measured in terms of trustworthiness. Specifically, the constructs used are credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. These are regarded as qualitative equivalents to the quantitative constructs of reliability, validity, objectivity and generalisability (Jackson et al., 2007).

Credibility refers to the level of accuracy and confidence with which constructions of the social world are represented. Activities that enhance credibility include triangulation, persistent observation, discussing the findings of the study with other researchers, and verifying the findings with the participants (Bradley, 1993). To enhance the credibility of this study, I used informal member checks during the data collection phase. I confirmed with participants that I had correctly understood their positions and asked clarifying questions if I was uncertain.

Transferability refers to "the extent that the researchers' working hypotheses about one context apply to another" (Bradley, 1993, p.436). It is the responsibility of the researcher to provide enough data, through rich, ample description, to allow these judgments to be made. Transferability was maintained in the current study by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon being studied. An additional measure taken was the use of several cases when gathering data, in order to maintain transferability.

Dependability refers to the coherence of the research process, and how the researcher accounts for changing conditions in the phenomena (Bradley, 1993). In order to maintain dependability, I strived to ensure that the research process was conducted in a consistent manner, in accordance with the conventions of qualitative research. Careful attention was paid to the research design, research questions, data collection procedure, sampling methods and data analysis method, to ensure that they were formulated in a manner that was logical and systematic. These steps were also checked and confirmed by my supervisor.

Confirmability refers to the integrity of the findings in relation to the data and the idea that the researcher must collate the data, analytic processes, and findings in such a way that the reader is able to confirm the adequacy of the findings. To maintain confirmability, it is essential that the researcher manages his or her own subjectivity (Morrow, 2005). In the present study, reflexivity was used to identify and document the ways in which I may have influenced the research process.

3.7. Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, according to the conventions prescribed by Goldstein (2008). Grammatical and speech errors were not corrected. An exclamation mark was used to indicate raised volume. Short pauses between words were denoted by a hyphen, whilst long pauses were denoted by ellipses. Laughter, sighing and non-verbal expressions such as nodding were also illustrated within brackets.

The transcribed data was analysed using the steps outlined in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). These steps comprise of initial coding, focused coding, memo-writing and theoretical sampling. According to Charmaz (1996) “Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data” (p.37). Initial coding involves examining each line or segment of data and labeling it according to the actions or events that it represents. The aim is to remain open to exploring all possible theoretical directions suggested by this close reading of the data. Initial codes are tentative, open-ended, and grounded in the data.

The next stage, focused coding, comprises of selecting significant and recurring initial codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding assists the researcher in identifying those initial codes that make the most analytic sense, and discovering links and connections amongst codes. It is more directed and conceptual than initial coding.

The third stage, memo-writing, refers to written explanations of ideas about codes and categories. It enables the researcher to elaborate on processes, assumptions, and actions covered by the codes or categories. Writing memos increases the level of abstract thinking and makes the analysis stronger, clearer and more theoretical.

Finally, theoretical sampling involves gathering data to develop and refine the emerging categories. It is conducted to fill in the properties of the categories, until saturation is achieved. Saturation occurs when the collection of additional data does not generate any new insights into the properties of the categories (Charmaz, 1996; Charmaz, 2006).

3.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues arise from the very beginning of the research (e.g. regarding the formulation of the research question), they stay with us throughout our interactions with our research participants, and they continue to be relevant throughout the process of dissemination of the research findings (Willig, 2008, p. 19).

Research can be oppressive or emancipatory, not only in its outcomes but in its very processes as well. 'Research findings' do not come from nowhere, they come from an interaction of the values and assumptions of the researcher with the particular historical representation of the phenomenon under study (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002, p.142).

Ethical issues arise in all forms of research, whether qualitative or quantitative. In addition, there are two dimensions of ethics in qualitative research: "procedural ethics" and "ethics in practice" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p.263-264). A discussion of these dimensions follows below.

3.8.1. Procedural Ethics

Before undertaking research involving human beings, the researcher is obliged to seek approval from a relevant ethics committee. This is known as procedural ethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Approval to conduct this study was obtained from The Ethics Review Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (See Appendix 3).

Procedural ethics aims to safeguard the rights of participants by ensuring that they are fully informed about the study before providing consent to participate; that their privacy and confidentiality are maintained; that they are protected from deception as well as harm; and that their psychological well-being and dignity are preserved (Willig, 2008). For example, I informed participants about the nature and purpose of the research, and exactly what taking part in the study would entail. They were also informed that involvement in the study was completely voluntary and that they could choose to withdraw at any time.

Furthermore, they were assured that their anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained at all times. Participants were given pseudonyms in the write up of the findings and in all further publications of this work. Permission was also sought from participants to tape-record the interviews and they were assured that the recordings and transcripts would be kept in a secure location in the School of Applied Human Sciences Psychology Department. After a period of five years, the data would be destroyed.

Participants were further informed that there would be no financial reward for participating in the study. On the other hand, there was a potential risk involved as they would be asked to share their personal experiences about a sensitive topic. This might prove upsetting in some cases. However, I emphasised that participants could choose not to answer a question if they felt uncomfortable doing so. In addition, if they required counselling, I offered to make an appointment with the Student Counselling Centre or the Psychology Clinic.

The above information was included in the informed consent form (see Appendix 2). Participants were asked to peruse these forms and only sign them once they understood the information contained. After each interview, a debriefing session was conducted, in which I discussed how the participant was feeling and addressed any concerns they had. I reminded

participants that my contact details and those of my supervisor were available to them should they feel the need to discuss something further or gain clarity on any issue.

3.8.2. “Ethics in Practice”

“Ethics in practice” refers to the daily ethical issues or significant moments that arise during the course of research. These include situations in which participants indicate signs of discomfort or reveal vulnerabilities; request for their own names to be used in the writing up of the findings instead of pseudonyms; or when the researcher has to decide how far to probe participants about a sensitive topic (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Ethics in practice can be regarded as more comprehensive than procedural ethics. In fact, procedural ethics are sometimes regarded as a mere formality, and they do not fully encompass the breadth of experiences and situations the researcher encounters (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Ethically important moments did indeed arise during the course of the data collection. For example, one participant, Diya, discussed a traumatic experience during the interview. I had to decide how far to probe her about it, without being insensitive to her feelings. I had given her the option of stopping the interview if she felt any discomfort. However, Diya chose to continue talking about the incident. Although the experience she was describing was a distressing one, she remained calm while speaking about it. I decided to keep the probing to a minimum, asking questions only when I required clarity about the incident. After the interview, we discussed at length how Diya was feeling and whether she felt she required counselling. She stated that she felt relieved to have opened up to someone about the experience, and having made peace with it some time ago, did not feel like she needed counselling. Nonetheless, I emphasised that I would be available to assist her if she changed her mind later on.

3.9. Summary

The methodology of the study is explained in this chapter. The constructivist grounded theory method is described, illustrating how it was used to guide the research design, sampling, data collection and data analysis procedures. There is also a description of how sampling and data collection progressed from the initial phase to the theoretical sampling phase. As mentioned in this chapter, data analysis was conducted with the goal of local theoretical reflection. The

trustworthiness of the study is also explored in relation to the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Finally, the ethical considerations that were encountered during the research process have been highlighted. The next chapter provides a detailed description of the study's findings.

Chapter Four: Results

In the grounded theory method, interpretation of data is an integral part of the empirical procedure. Grounded theory does not follow the linear process of first collecting data and then interpreting it. Instead, data collection and analysis are conducted simultaneously, with the emerging data being coded as it is collected (Flick, 2009). This serves to develop early conceptualisations of ideas and builds the foundation for collecting additional data. The aim of grounded theory analysis is to generate explanations or theories for social phenomena. The results and analysis of data are closely linked in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This chapter therefore provides a description of the analysis together with the results.

4.1. Outline of the Data Analysis Process

The initial interviews explored areas such as the participants' understandings and experiences of RA, RA and friendships, and lessons learned from experiences with RA. These interviews were analysed through the processes of initial coding, focused coding and memo-writing. The analysis of the initial interviews led to the development of four tentative core categories. These categories were centred on a core set of focused codes and highlighted connections between the codes. The tentative categories were labelled as follows: *The Prevalence of RA Amongst Females*; *Fragile Friendships*; *Jealousy and Competition*; and *Popularity and Idealised Femininity*. These categories pertained to the main research questions, "How is RA understood by South African females?" and "What are some of the experiences they have had with RA?" The participants seemed to conceptualise RA as a common practice amongst females. Their experiences with RA indicated that it emerged mainly from conflict in same-sex female friendships. The participants' experiences of RA also revealed associations with jealousy and competition for exclusivity in friendships, male attention, academic achievement and social status. Finally, they described how the desire for popularity and adherence to idealised or stereotypical notions of feminine behaviour exacerbated the phenomenon of RA.

The analysis and results are discussed in further detail below. One of the tentative categories, *Fragile Friendships*, has been used in this chapter to illustrate how initial coding, focused

coding and memo-writing were used to develop this category and fill in the properties of the category.

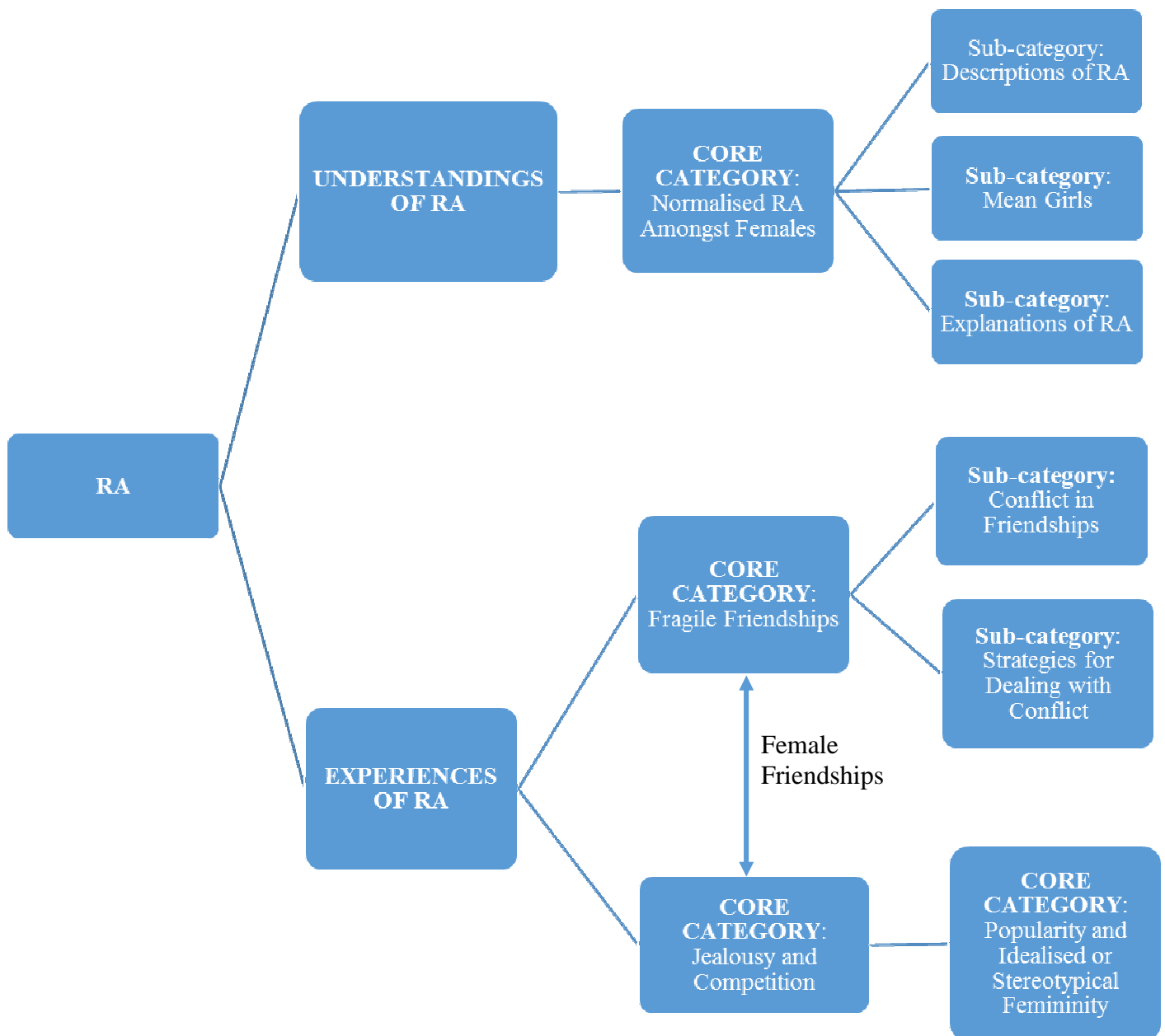
Female friendships were depicted as being of high value and significance in the lives of the participants. However, during the interviews it became apparent that RA seemed to emerge mainly out of conflict situations in female friendships. The participants' descriptions of how they managed these conflict situations indicated that they often avoided the use of direct discussion of the problem or confrontation, and often turned to other methods of dealing with conflict, such as RA. This led to the development of the code, 'Negative/Indirect Handling', in the processes of initial coding and focused coding. Through memo-writing, I was able to elaborate on how conflict was experienced and managed in female friendships. The memos enabled me to see the reasons that conflict emerged in female friendships, the strategies used to deal with conflict, and the severity of harm caused by experiences of conflict. This resulted in the development of the tentative category, *Fragile Friendships*, and the sub-categories *Conflict in Friendships* and *Strategies for Dealing with Conflict*.

After the development of the tentative categories, theoretical sampling was used to refine the categories and discover how the categories were linked with each other. Three additional interviews were conducted to fulfil this purpose. The data from these interviews was used to elaborate on the tentative categories (*The Prevalence of RA Amongst Females; Fragile Friendships; Jealousy and Competition; and Popularity and Idealised Femininity*) and further develop the properties of the categories, resulting in the construction of the final categories and sub-categories.

The final categories were as follows: *Normalised RA Amongst Females; Fragile Friendships; Jealousy and Competition; Popularity and Idealised or Stereotypical Femininity*. There were also five sub-categories: *Descriptions of RA; RA and Mean Girls; Explanations of RA; Conflict in Friendships* and *Strategies for Dealing with Conflict*. These categories and sub-categories arose out of the two main research questions of the study, namely, 'How is RA understood by South African females?' and 'What are some of the experiences they have had with RA?' The categories and sub-categories are connected to one another through what appears to be a sequential pattern. The findings have been organised diagrammatically into a working model (Figure 2) in order to illustrate how they interact with one another to reflect the participants' understandings and experiences of RA. In the sections that follow, I intend

demonstrating how the categories and sub-categories were developed and organised into this model.

Figure 1: Diagrammatical Representation of Categories and Sub-Categories



4.2. Initial Coding

The first phase of analysis involved initial coding. According to Charmaz (2006) “Coding is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations” (p. 43). Initial coding comprises of a close reading of the data in order to assign a code or name to each word, line, or segment. It helps the researcher sort the data into categories and to discover processes in the data. In the present study, initial codes in the present study were developed through the use of line-by-line coding. Each individual transcript was examined line-by-line. This resulted in close study of the data and generated codes which were grounded in the data. Charmaz (2006) encourages the use of line-by-line coding as it allows the researcher to remain open to the data and helps to avoid imposing his or her own preconceived notions on the data.

The participants’ own words (*in vivo* codes) were often used. Although it was time-consuming, *in vivo* coding proved useful as it enabled me to convey participants’ own meanings of their views and actions in the codes. Gerunds (words that focus on action and process) were also used to convey a sense of action and highlight processes that otherwise might remain invisible (Charmaz, 2012).

The initial coding process is illustrated in Table 3 below. Line-by-line coding was used to analyse the participant’s response to the interview question, “How do you deal with conflict in a friendship?” This particular example was included because conflict in friendships emerged as a common feature in participants’ understanding and experiences of RA. Zanele’s description of how girls handled conflict was rich and in-depth. She suggested that when conflict arose, girls were often unwilling to discuss the situation in order to resolve the conflict. She also suggested that girls preferred to use strategies such as exacting revenge and inflicting harm, instead of engaging in mature discussion of the problem. Although other participants expressed similar sentiments, they provided less detail than Zanele’s description.

The initial codes reflected the reluctance to engage in direct discussion or confrontation of the problem. These codes were later condensed into one focused code, ‘Negative/Indirect Handling’.

Table 3: Initial Coding Process

Excerpt from Interview	Initial Coding
<p>Saajida: How do you deal with conflict in a friendship?</p>	
<p>Zanele: I think most girls handle conflict [laughs], whereby they always want to do something that would cause pain instead of talking about it, like instead of just calling you and saying “no, um I didn’t feel like that you responded well for a certain situation and I was really hurt, you know”, and then there you would see that yes, I did something wrong, you would acknowledge that and therefore you will be apologise, “I am really sorry, I didn’t even notice that I inflicted pain on you” and stuff like that so girls just run away from that-sometimes some girls do that, they just want to prove a point that “I can also do what you did to me”, you know, instead of talking about it and coming up with a proper conclusion you know and being mature about the situation, you know, talking things through, but I think basically some girls would rather see you suffer than actually apologizing for things or coming to a proper communicated conclusion</p>	<p>Doing something to cause pain</p> <p>Avoiding talking about feelings</p> <p>Not giving the friend a chance to apologise</p> <p>Using revenge to prove a point</p> <p>Avoiding direct discussion of the problem</p> <p>Not being mature about the situation</p> <p>Inflicting harm rather than rectifying the situation</p>

4.3. Focused Coding

The next stage of analysis was focused coding. The most significant or frequent initial codes were selected to sift through and explain the data. Codes and data were compared with each other, in order to find similarities and differences. Through this comparison, several codes that were used to describe similar incidents or statements were refined into a focused code (Charmaz, 2006). Focused coding resulted in the reduction of a large number of initial codes, making it easier to manage the codes and find connections between codes. In the example below, seven codes were initially generated from a participants’ description of how conflict

was managed in friendships. These codes were subsequently grouped together into one focused code, ‘Negative/Indirect Handling’. With the use of memo-writing, this code was later developed into a tentative category. The focused coding process is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Focused Coding Process

Excerpt from Interview	Initial Coding	Focused Coding
<p>Saajida: How do you deal with conflict in a friendship?</p>		
<p>Zanele: I think most girls handle conflict [laughs], whereby they always want to do something that would cause pain instead of talking about it, like instead of just calling you and saying “no, um I didn’t feel like that you responded well for a certain situation and I was really hurt, you know”, and then there you would see that yes, I did something wrong, you would acknowledge that and therefore you will be apologise, “I am really sorry, I didn’t even notice that I inflicted pain on you” and stuff like that so girls just run away from that- sometimes some girls do that, they just want to prove a point that “I can also do what you did to me”, you know, instead of talking about it and coming up with a proper conclusion you know and being mature about the situation, you know, talking things through, but I think basically some girls would rather see you suffer than actually apologizing for things or coming to a proper communicated conclusion.</p>	<p>Doing something to cause pain</p> <p>Avoiding talking about feelings</p> <p>Not giving the friend a chance to apologise</p> <p>Using revenge to prove a point</p> <p>Avoiding direct discussion of the problem</p> <p>Not being mature about the situation</p> <p>Inflicting harm rather than rectifying the situation</p>	<p>Negative/Indirect Handling</p>

4.4. Memo-writing

The interpretation of data was also facilitated by the use of memo-writing. Charmaz (2006) describes the importance of writing memos in the following manner:

Memo-writing constitutes a crucial method in grounded theory because it prompts you to analyze your data and codes early in the research process. Writing successive memos throughout the research process keeps you involved in the analysis and helps you to increase the level of abstraction of your ideas. Certain codes stand out and form as theoretical categories as you write successive memos. Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. Through conversing with yourself while memo-writing, new ideas and insights arise during the act of writing.(p. 72)

Memos were written throughout the phases of data collection and analysis. After each interview, I wrote a memo reflecting on what I had learned from the interview, my impressions of the interview and the participant's reactions. Memos were also written about the focused codes, which enabled me to refine these codes into conceptual categories. In accordance with Sbaraini, Carter, Evans and Blinkhorn's (2011) example of memo-writing, my early memos attempted to record the processes that were described in the data, the conditions under which they developed, the participants' thinking, feelings and actions while involved in them, how they changed and what the consequences of these processes were.

Figure 2 provides an example of a case-based memo which was recorded after my interview with Zanele, which was the second interview in the initial phase of data collection. The memo recorded my impressions of the interview. Of particular interest was Zanele's response to the question, 'How do you deal with conflict in a friendship?' Her response provided a context for understanding the participants' experiences of RA in relation to female friendships. Zanele's indirect response to the interview question seemed to indicate that she was hesitant to describe her own methods of dealing with conflict in a friendship. She chose to describe how girls in general handled conflict, instead of discussing her personal approach to situations of conflict. The memo elaborates on these observations.

Figure 2: Memo –Zanele’s Interview

Zanele spoke at length about her friendships with other girls in school. Her recollections indicated that she valued these friendships and regarded them as highly important. However, there also seemed to be regular occurrences of conflict. She noted that girls in general sometimes became part of unhealthy, “oppressive” friendships. An oppressive friendship, in her opinion, was one which was unequal and one-sided. One friend would use the other for their academic abilities or financial resources, and there was no loyalty in such friendships.

When I asked Zanele how she handled conflict in a friendship, she seemed to deflect the question by describing how girls in general handled conflict, instead of her own methods of dealing with conflict. She spoke about how girls handled conflict in negative or indirect ways, such as avoiding discussing their feelings or using revenge to prove a point. Zanele’s reluctance to directly answer the question could be explained by the fact that perhaps she did not feel comfortable enough to open up to me completely. This suggests that I need to pay careful attention to how the other participants respond to this question in the interviews that follow. Asking them about how they would respond to a hypothetical situation (such as what they would do if they found out a friend was talking about them behind their back) might make it easier for them to respond.

As the interview progressed, though, Zanele did become more comfortable discussing her experiences. She mentioned that in high school, she was part of a clique of girls who picked on others and engaged in RA. A comment from her mother about being aware of one’s actions made her realise that what she and her friends were doing was wrong. She refused to engage in any further acts of RA and confronted her friends about their behaviour-indicating that she regarded confrontation as a useful way of dealing with conflict. Some of her friends stopped speaking to her, and she became concerned that she would end up alone. Zanele was forthcoming about the hurt she had felt when she faced these consequences. However, she also seemed to take a pragmatic approach to the situation. She felt that she was better off without such friends and reassured herself that she had done the right thing. I got the sense that she was proud of herself for honouring her values and ending her involvement as a perpetrator of RA.

4.5. Theoretical Sampling

After data collection and analysis of the initial interviews, I developed four tentative core categories to explain the participants’ understandings and experiences of RA: *The Prevalence of RA Amongst Females, Fragile Friendships, Jealousy and Competition*; and *Popularity and*

Idealised Femininity. To elaborate on the categories, discover variations, and fill in the gaps among them, theoretical sampling was followed. It assisted in refining the categories in order to create analytic definitions and explanations. It also assisted in discovering how the categories were linked with each other (Charmaz, 2006). Three additional interviews were conducted. As with the initial interviews, potential participants who met the study criteria were approached and the research topic was described to them. Three individuals indicated a willingness to participate in the study. The characteristics of these participants are recorded in Table 5 below. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of each participant.

Table 5: Characteristics of Theoretical Sampling Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race
Parveen	25	Indian
Lerato	21	Black
Yajna	25	Indian

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the procedure for data collection was the same as the procedure undertaken in the initial interviews. As ethical clearance had already been obtained for the initial questions, the questions were not changed in the additional interviews. One difference was that the film clips were not shown to participants in the additional interviews. In the initial interviews, viewing the clips had stimulated conversation about RA. To an extent, however, it seemed to influence the participants' definitions of RA. In some cases, they defined RA in accordance with what they had watched on the film clips. I was concerned that the participants' own understandings and experiences of RA were not being fully explored in the interviews. The extracts below illustrate how Zanele and Ayesha's descriptions of the 'mean girl' and RA were largely influenced by what they had watched on the clips, instead of their personal experiences with mean girls and RA¹:

“Well a mean girl in my perspective is someone who just says something, knowing very well that if it were reflected to them it would hurt them...um someone who always wants to fit in, it doesn't matter-it doesn't matter if they bring someone down

¹For emphasis, certain phrases in the extracts have been underlined.

while they are trying to get to the top....um I mean like uh in the clip that we saw with the school girls? they were talking to a hot guy apparently [laughs] so the girl that came to sit with them, they felt she wasn't good enough, she wasn't wearing the right clothes, she wasn't like on top of the game, therefore she didn't-she wasn't accepted in that kind of group so in order for them to shine they have to suppress the people they feel they might be a threat to them, so if for example she had the clothes that they had, she would actually be better than they are because she not only-she doesn't only look good but she is also intelligent and stuff like that.”(Zanele)

“Okay personally I guess I would say that RA is something that's hard to describe because it applies in-like they said in the clip-like a very discreet kind of way. People don't really-don't take too much into it, you see someone rolling their eyes or whatever, you don't really like think, 'why should she take offence to that?' or whatever, but it's a bit deeper than that, because if it keeps happening to a person I'm guessing it does take an effect on their psyche or whatever. So ja, it would eventually have an effect on a person if you keep passing them hints that, 'hey, you know, we don't like you very much' and especially in like the second video it's like-it's pretty obvious that they don't, by like completely shunning her and ostracising her, like not allowing her to be part of the group just because they didn't like the fact that she wasn't rich enough, or that her hair wasn't good enough, or her clothes were not good enough and stuff like that.” (Ayesha)

The information gathered from the additional interviews helped me to fill in the properties of the core categories. For example, I had developed the category, 'Popularity and Idealised or Stereotypical Femininity'. This category described how popularity was a desired social status and resulted in girls competing with each other to gain this status. It also illustrated the link between popularity and idealised notions of femininity. After gathering more data through theoretical sampling, I was able to refine the category and relate it to definitions of the mean girl. The excerpt below, which was from one of the additional interviews, seemed to provide a direct confirmation of the association between popularity and RA behaviour.

“I think a mean girl is someone who is popular-someone who /is more concerned with being popular than having true friends....I think if you popular, like you want status,

and I think that that basically will make you a mean girl, where you have the authority to just speak about people or say what you want because you hold that status.” (Parveen)

4.6. The Core Categories

The first core category that emerged was *Normalised RA Amongst Females*. This appeared to be consistently reflected in the data. RA was described as a characteristic of more typically female behaviour (as opposed to male behaviour). It was expressed through the explanations that participants provided for the development of RA, describing traits such as meanness as inherent in girls:

“Well I think it’s like-it’s just female behaviour. People have seen it happen before and because of that they just repeat it...generations and generations they just repeat the same behaviour....girls are just generally-they can be quite cattish and mean...”(Ayesha)

“...it just shows that that’s how girls are, this whole emotion and we tend to take revenge, we hold grudges, I don’t know why but I think it’s just a female characteristic.” (Priyanka)

Participants were able to easily identify and describe the ‘mean girl’:

A mean girl is someone who doesn’t have a conscience. I think she’s someone who can tell you off for the wrong reasons... like um someone who’s not afraid to hurt your feelings and not in a good way, like some people tell you off or tell you straight because it’s for your own good, and then you get those girls that tell you off because they intentionally want to hurt you and they intentionally want you to doubt yourself, okay that will be a mean girl.” (Jayshree)

They drew on their own experiences in order to provide examples of mean girl behaviour:

“From my own experiences, I think it’s basically when girls act nasty and come across as cattish towards each other, and examples would be like talking behind someone’s back, or doing something to jeopardise something for them, you know?”(Yajna)

“My description of a mean girl is a person who-we are all on the same level but you go out there, you try to be part of a gang but this person will continuously dominate you, insult you, everything you say becomes a laugh, a mock, everything you do, anything you wear, how you present yourself, you just get mocked for everything by that one person and you tend to-I feel like you tend to look at that person and you don’t realise what they are doing is hurting you, you just feel that ‘no, it’s okay’ and from that person it goes to the next person, and the next person sees how that person is taking over you, so they say, ‘okay we can also take over that person’ and because you are weak you tend to let yourself get trampled over. That’s from my experience.”(Priyanka)

Fragile Friendships was another core category identified. The findings implied that females placed a high value on their friendships with other females. They became “attached to people” through emotional connections:

“...I totally understand what they mean by relational aggression, using your relationship that you have with someone else knowing that someone is close to you, you’d use that against them and girls are very emotional people and that’s how we attach to people. That’s how we became friends with someone because besides you guys having something common or enjoying the same thing, there is an emotional connection, so it makes a lot of sense for someone to use that against you because it’s the ultimate way to hurt you really.” (Ayanda)

These relationships were, however, complicated by frequent situations of conflict. The participants described these situations as distressing. In close friendships, in particular, conflict was regarded as extremely painful. As the opinion of a close friend was valued, negative feedback from them could lead to self-doubt:

“...if you start doubting yourself and if you do have friends, you tend to go them and ask them, ‘is there something wrong with me?’, you know, ‘this person is treating me like this’, and they will be like, ‘no, just ignore them, they were just being mean’ and they give you advice that you tend to take and you like-I guess you feel better about yourself if they say good things about you, because those are the people that really matter to you...if your friends say something mean to you it has a greater impact on you because obviously that person knows the person that you are, they know you and have been your friend for so long and if they can say something bad then it’s like okay, that really hurts because you don’t just know them, they are somebody to you, so ja, everything your friend does has an impact in a small way.” (Ayesha)

“...I mean if I decide that you are a close friend of mine, then you are a close friend of mine. If you are not a friend who we’re very close with, then it shouldn’t matter what you say about me, you’re not so important to me that I’d listen or take it to heart what you said. Because I think when someone’s really close to you, like a close friend says something about you, you kind of think they know you well, so whatever they saying you take it to heart, you start questioning yourself.” (Ayanda)

Strategies for dealing with conflict included ignoring the situation, engaging in confrontation or engaging in RA as a subtle way of expressing feelings of anger and disappointment with a friend. The decision to engage in confrontation was influenced by factors such as the closeness of the friendship and the balance of power in the friendship.

According to the participants, female friendships in general were further complicated by issues such as *Jealousy and Competition*. A culture of jealousy and competition, as opposed to sisterhood, appeared to exist amongst girls. They competed with one another for exclusivity in friendships, attention from boys, academic achievement and social status:

“It’s like the bottom line, girls are jealous beings you know [laughs] they don’t want to be the third person, they just want to be me and my friend, you know, not me and my other friend, you just want to be with that person and make sure that no one else

comes into the picture....they are jealous of a lot of things, the way you dress, um the way you carry yourself as an individual, your confidence. But they fail to understand that you are a confident person, you know what you want in life, you go for it, um they could be jealous of...your abilities-certain abilities-you able to make new friends or to speak well, or you able to perform well in class and all those other things, some people I think it's for like-it goes a different way for different people.” (Zanele)

“...all of a sudden we hit puberty and everyone started, you know, like girls and boys started noticing each other even more, and jealousy started happening from girls looking at other guys looking at me, and even though I wasn't-uh I wasn't even interested in the guys, they just saw that guys were looking at me and they felt threatened, maybe.” (Jayshree)

Popularity and Idealised or Stereotypical Femininity was the final category identified. The participants suggested that competitiveness arose out of the need for popularity. Girls who were perceived as popular were admired and envied by others. They strove to adhere to the norms of idealised femininity through their dressing, following of trends and interactions with boys:

“...they used to party, have cute boyfriends who could fetch them with their cars, you know, they always had the most recent fashion statement, kind of thing, they were the first to have everything that was new, they were the first to go to a new place that has been opened, wherever it may be, um they were just the centre of attraction or attention at school, you know the people that every girl wanted to be like and stuff like that, so ja.”(Zanele)

Perceived popularity was associated with mean girl behaviour and RA. When asked to describe a mean girl, Lerato and Parveen seemed to describe her as someone with perceived popularity:

“Well in my mind I would think like she is a popular girl, she would be pretty and skinny and everything....she is mean, she does horrible things to, I would say people

who are-she considers-who listen to her, like maybe like the geek in the class, or whatever, the person who wears glasses or reads books or does their homework, or whatever, she would target them I would say, um ja.” (Lerato)

“I think a mean girl is someone who is popular-someone who is more concerned with being popular than having true friends....I think if you popular, like you want status, and I think that that basically will make you a mean girl, where you have the authority to just speak about people or say what you want because you hold that status.” (Parveen)

Mean girls were often admired because of their perceived popularity. Other girls were eager to gain their approval, even if it meant leaving their comfort zones:

“I guess the mean girls, the girls that were very nasty towards others, what I noticed is that they were more popular than those they thought were below them. So I think in times like that, other people admire these girls that are popular, so they always wanting to get their approval and probably wanting to become- to get into this clique per se, so they always wanting to...Gain their approval and they are willing to go over their own comfort-to come out of their comfort zone to please them.”(Nadia)

In some cases, this desire for approval and acceptance from girls who were perceived as popular led to the use of relationally aggressive behaviour:

“...I was told by some people-my sister told me, some of the people in my school and my grade said...I was conceited, by that. I was like, ‘really?’ then I realised-she told me recently, like you know, ‘they told me you were all conceited, and some of the girls told me you're mean’, so I was like was that-was I becoming one of those girls that, you know, that I experienced bad things from? Was I actually becoming those type of girls? Snobby, catty, mean to other people, whatever...now that I think about it, yes, and like you regret it afterwards, but I think I-maybe it was-I know it's wrong to say, but necessary? But it was necessary for me, so I can learn to see what those girls did, even though like I used to see like they were the popular-had friends or whatever-

that's not how you go about treating people. So I think it was kind of necessary for me. I know it's wrong to say it's necessary for a girl to be mean, or catty or whatever...I was trying to like...be accepted by them, I guess.”(Arya)

It was also suggested that RA was used by popular girls to punish those who did not adhere to idealised or stereotypical notions of femininity. Lerato acknowledged that in high school, she and her friends targeted girls who did not conform to the ideal and did not fit in with the others:

“Ja in high school, we had a group of friends, I think sometimes we were the mean girl so I’ll own up to that, uh we just used to pick on people that we felt were not good enough for our group, uh quiet people, the reserved girls, uh people that were deemed not normal, kind of thing, like they didn’t fit in, like ja [laughs] if I can say that....they didn’t have the things that we had, like phones, clothes, or they didn’t live where we lived, you know, those kind of things and then we just feel that they’re outsiders...”(Lerato)

Arya, on the other hand, recalled being subjected to RA in primary school because she did not conform to the standards of idealised femininity and was regarded as different:

“...in primary school, what happened is the teachers put you next to a boy. And that was grade 5 or 6, so in that grade, I was put next to her boyfriend or the boy she liked or whatever, and then one of the girls went and said I liked that guy, and I wasn't even interested. She was like the big mean, popular girl, type of thing, and I was just the girl who liked reading, liked my books...okay, maybe because of that I didn't have friends and I was different-I know I'm still different compared to everyone else-so they surrounded me and they made me sit down, and they were like, 'tell us what happened, do you like him?', and whatever, and I was like, 'this is bull, I'm not going to listen to this'. So I went to the bathroom and I locked the door. And then she pulled up with girls, all the popular ones were there. In the next bathroom we had like a broken...whatever you call that thing? Toilet-seat thing? She threw it on, like there,

and it was embarrassing because on both sides they could see, when they stood on the toilets, and then I was like really humiliated.” (Arya)

4.7. Summary

This chapter contains an account of how the collected data was analysed and interpreted. The final result of this process is conveyed through the development of four main categories, *Normalised RA Amongst Females; Fragile Friendships; Jealousy and Competition; Popularity and Idealised or Stereotypical Femininity*, as well as five sub-categories: *Descriptions of RA; RA and Mean Girls; Explanations of RA; Conflict in Friendships; and Strategies for Dealing with Conflict*. The category *Normalised RA Amongst Females* suggests that RA was regarded as normative and common amongst females. This was reflected in the participant’s descriptions of mean girls and the causes they attributed to the development of RA. *Fragile Friendships* suggests that female friendships were highly important in the lives of the participants. However, these friendships often encountered situations of conflict, and strategies for dealing with conflict sometimes involved the use of RA. Female relationships in general also seemed to be complicated by *Jealousy and Competition* for friendships, male attention, social status and academic achievement, leading to situations in which RA flourished. RA was further used to achieve and maintain *Popularity and Idealised or Stereotypical Femininity*. In the next chapter a more detailed discussion and contextualisation of these categories, in relation to the literature, is presented.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the primary findings of the study in relation to the aim as well as the literature. The aim of this study was to explore RA in a South African context, by focusing on young South African women's understandings and experiences of RA. As discussed in Chapter Three, Pidgeon and Henwood (1997) suggest that there are three goals that can be achieved through grounded theory analysis: taxonomy development, local theoretical reflection and 'fully-fledged' grounded theory. Local theoretical reflection was selected as the goal of the current study. Specifically, the aim was to initiate conceptual development, by focusing on the fit between the categories and the data, the level of abstraction of the core categories and the initial relationships between categories.

The research findings consisted of locating core categories and sub-categories across the data. These core categories and sub-categories were generated from questions about the participants' understandings and experiences of RA, as well as their responses and lessons learned from dealing with the phenomenon. The participants' understandings appear to reinforce the notion that RA is pervasive and normalised amongst females. This is reflected in their definitions of RA, familiarity with 'mean girl' behaviour, and their explanations about the development of RA. The participants' experiences of RA depict female friendships as 'fragile' and characterised by conflict, and sometimes lead to relationally aggressive responses. The female friendships that they described seemed to be complicated by issues of jealousy and competition, which include competition for popularity and the struggle to maintain an idealised or stereotypical image of femininity.

5.2. Understandings of RA

The participants' understandings of RA were explored in the question, "What do you understand by 'RA' and 'mean girls'?" Their responses suggested that RA was perceived as common and prevalent amongst girls, leading to the emergence of the core category, *Normalised RA Amongst Females*. This normalisation seemed to be embedded in the

participants' descriptions of RA, their definitions of 'mean girls', and the explanations they provided for the development of RA.

5.2.1. Normalised RA Amongst Females

Normalised RA Amongst Females emerged as a core category as it was consistently reflected through participants' understandings of RA. Their descriptions of RA seemed to illustrate that the participants accepted RA as 'normal' female behaviour. This construction was expressed in a number of ways, leading to the development of three sub-categories: *Descriptions of RA*, *RA and Mean Girls* and *Explanations of RA*. The participants' descriptions of RA indicated that it was regarded as 'normal' or 'typically female' behaviour. The term 'mean girl' was instantly recognised by participants. They provided rich descriptions of the 'mean girl' and linked these descriptions with their own experiences of RA amongst females. The participants' familiarity with mean girls, as well as their detailed descriptions, seemed to indicate that RA was common amongst females. Consistent with Social Role Theory (Eagly & Steffen, 1986) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), the explanations that the participants provided for the emergence of RA seemed to involve gender role socialisation, as well as social learning principles such as observational learning and reinforcement. These explanations provided a context for understanding how RA developed and how it was perceived as normalised amongst females. The core category *Normalised RA Amongst Females* was also linked with three other core categories: *Fragile Friendships*; *Jealousy and Competition*; and *Popularity and Idealised or Stereotypical Femininity*.

Descriptions of RA

In general, the participants described RA as a non-physical form of aggression that occurred amongst girls. It was seen as a characteristic of more typically female behaviour, as opposed to male behaviour. These definitions are consistent with definitions of RA in the literature. Researchers such as Crick et al. (1999) and Lansford et al. (2012) have described physical aggression and RA as separate constructs. Although research on the relationship between gender roles and RA has produced mixed results, many researchers maintain that RA is far more prevalent in female interactions than in male interactions (Goldberg, 2009). Research

suggests that by the age of 11, girls surpass boys on measures of indirect aggression, such as RA (Campbell, 2004).

The normalisation of RA amongst females is documented in the literature. The participants' tendency to describe RA as how "girls are" is linked with the common rationalisation of RA as "part of what girls do" (Simmons, 2004, p.4). Researchers and policymakers sometimes dismiss RA as a female rite of passage and a regular process of girls learning social skills. As a result, it is not acknowledged as a serious problem that warrants targeted responses and intervention from adults (Hammel, 2008; Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006).

In an exception to the norm, Ayanda recalled acts of RA that were perpetrated by a boy. It is interesting to note, however, that the boy was labelled as the "sidekick" of a female perpetrator, indicating that he was acting under her orders and not in his own capacity.

RA and Mean Girls

The participants' descriptions seemed to convey a sense of difficulty in articulating their understandings of the term 'RA'. This could be attributed to the fact that RA is subtle and covert in nature, making it more difficult to conceptualise than physical aggression (Goldberg, 2009). For example, Ayesha stated that RA was difficult to describe due to its discreet nature. Another participant, Maryam, confused RA with sexual aggression.

It is significant to note that the participants appeared more comfortable with the term 'mean girl' than the term 'RA'. There was an immediate recognition of what the term 'mean girl' meant and no clarification was needed. Participants were able to provide detailed descriptions of a mean girl.

They were also able to relate these descriptions to their own experiences of RA at the hands of mean girls. Priyanka provided a detailed illustration of mistreatment at the hands of mean girls. She recalled being victimised because she was perceived as weak and was therefore an easy target.

This familiarity with the 'mean girl' seemed to indicate that RA was prevalent amongst young adult women and easily recognised by the participants. The participants' descriptions of RA and mean girls also suggest that while RA was seen as more typically 'female behaviour', the mean girl applied to a specific type of female personality. RA appeared to be associated with more subtle behaviours (such as "holding a grudge") and was thus regarded as more acceptable. The mean girl, on the other hand, seemed to be associated with more overt behaviours (such as "telling you off" or "dominating you") which were seen as inappropriate and unacceptable. RA was also described as something carried out by females "in general", indicating that it was seen as a widespread, common and perhaps even acceptable type of behaviour among females. The mean girl, however, seemed to be described in polarising, 'us and them' terms, suggesting a form of othering that condemned this example of unacceptable femininity. It can be argued that the participants used this type of language to distance themselves from what was perceived as inappropriate female behaviour. Currie et al (2009) point out that popular culture depicts the mean girl as a testament to females becoming "over-empowered" and "too much like their male counterparts" (p.104).

Descriptions of the 'mean girl' were also linked with traditional expectations of females as sensitive and caring. For example, in response to the interview questions, "Who, in your opinion, is a 'mean girl'?" and "Please describe an example of a mean girl", Maryam acknowledged that she and her friends occasionally engaged in mean girl behaviour. This behaviour was, however, seemed to be balanced with moments of 'niceness', such as being mindful of sensitive issues and limiting the extent of RA.

The notion that girls should be sensitive to others is linked to traditional socialisation practices, which encourage girls to be nurturing and caring in their interactions with others. According to Social Role Theory (Eagly & Steffen, 1986), the traditional male gender role promotes tough, violent and aggressive behaviour, while the traditional female gender role focuses less on aggression and more on nurturing and caring for others. Boys are encouraged to engage in physically aggressive and competitive behaviour, whereas girls are encouraged to be caring, with particular emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Boys therefore learn that aggression is an appropriate pattern of behavior, while girls learn that it is inappropriate (Carlo et al., 1999; Gilligan, 1982). These ideas have implications for the ways in which

aggression is displayed amongst girls and boys. It can be argued that this contributes to the normalisation of RA amongst females. Since girls are denied the use of physical aggression, they turn to RA in order to express negative emotions like anger and frustration, and begin to regard this type of behaviour as normal and acceptable (Pellegrini & Long, 2003).

Explanations of RA

Various explanations were given by the participants for the occurrence of RA amongst females. One explanation involved gender role socialisation. In childhood, boys and girls are assigned different social roles. Boys are encouraged to be tough and engage in rough play, whilst girls are encouraged to be “emotional”, passive and submissive in their interactions with others. This has a lifelong impact on the way in which boys and girls express their emotions and relate to other people. These ideas are consistent with the tenets of Social Role Theory, which suggests that gender role expectancies are created through socialisation practices (Pellegrini & Long, 2003).

The participants also speculated that RA could develop as a result of observing models in one's immediate environment enacting this type of behaviour. For example, if a girl witnessed her sister being mean to other people, she would think that this type of behaviour was acceptable and begin to imitate it.

The media was also regarded as a source of observational learning for RA. Jayshree recalled that when she was in primary school, a group of girls decided to follow an example of RA that was enacted in a popular film. They created a ‘burn book’ in which they wrote derogatory comments about other girls in the grade. Jayshree was framed for having created the book.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides an explanation for this phenomenon. According to the theory, behaviour is learned through the processes of observation, modeling, reinforcement or punishment. An individual learns how to behave in a certain way by observing behaviour that is modeled by people in the immediate environment. Behaviour that is positively reinforced is repeated in the future, while behaviour that is negatively reinforced or punished is not repeated. RA thus develops through observing models at home, at school,

in the community, society, and the media (Botha, 2014). For instance, if family members use RA to resolve conflict, children who observe this may enact the same type of behaviour in their own relationships with others (Soenens et al., 2008). Girls who, in particular, observe female role models avoiding conflict with others, are likely to use relationally aggressive acts to express their negative emotions.

Botha (2014) conducted a study to examine RA amongst 25 primary school learners. The findings indicated that due to the covert nature of RA, it often remained undetected by teachers. The perpetrators did not face any punishment for this type of behaviour and it was thus reinforced. This was also observed in the current study. Priyanka recalled that incidents of RA in high school usually occurred at the end of a sports activity when the teachers were not present to witness it. This type of behaviour was repeated every week because the perpetrators were able to get away with it.

Summary of Understandings of RA

The participants' understandings of RA are represented by the core category, *Normalised RA Amongst Females*. This normalisation seemed to be embedded in the participants' descriptions of RA, their definitions of 'mean girls', and the explanations they provided for the development of RA. The participants described RA more typically female behaviour or "how girls are". They were familiar with the phenomenon 'mean girl' and provided detailed descriptions of their experiences with mean girls. The explanations that they provided for the emergence of RA involved gender role socialisation and observational learning.

5.3. Experiences of RA

The participants' experiences of RA were explored in the question, "Can you describe your experiences with RA?" Their responses suggested that RA arose mainly out of conflict situations in female friendships. This was represented by the core category *Fragile Friendships*. The sub-category *Conflict in Friendships* highlights the major sources of conflict and the negative impact of unhealthy friendships. The sub-category *Strategies for Dealing with Conflict* illustrates how the participants managed the conflict situations that arose in their friendships. The participants also described how their interactions with other females were sometimes affected by jealousy and competition, leading to the use of RA. One

of the major sources of competition was the desire for popularity, which was associated with an idealised or stereotypical image of femininity.

5.3.1. Fragile Friendships

The exploitation of emotional connections is well documented in the literature. Females are regarded as social beings who value their same-sex friendships more than boys do. They perceive these friendships as rewarding, but also experience high levels of tension in their friendships (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). This can be attributed to the fact that RA usually occurs within the context of established female friendships. It is driven by the intimate nature of these relationships. The most hurtful attacks arise from the shared confidences of a close friendship (Crothers et al., 2005; Field et al., 2006).

Fragile Friendships was one of the core categories identified. It is separated into the sub-categories *Conflict in Friendships* and *Strategies for Dealing with Conflict*. The findings revealed that females valued their friendships with other females. However, conflict was widespread in these relationships. The participants' responses revealed significant information about the challenges encountered in female friendships and the strategies used to deal with these challenges.

5.3.1. Conflict in Friendships

The high value that girls placed on their emotional connections with others appeared to leave them vulnerable to harm. There was an acknowledgement of the risk involved in forming close attachments with other girls, as these connections could be used to inflict acts of RA. Ayanda suggested that because girls were highly emotional beings exploiting an emotional connection to hurt another girl was the ultimate form of RA.

The primary sources of conflict that emerged from the data were as follows: being used or taken advantage of by a friend; disloyalty and betrayal of secrets; and the involvement of boys. The involvement of boys was related to competing for attention from boys or prioritising a romantic relationship with a boy over friendship with a girl. There was also a

sense that the company of boys was preferred, as boys were regarded as less complicated and more loyal than girls. Ayesha suggested that boys were able to easily forgive their friends and resolve problems in their friendships quickly, while girls had a tendency to hold grudges. Girls also used relationally aggressive tactics such as ignoring and alliance building in situations of conflict.

The findings also supported the assumption that the more meaningful the friendship, the greater the capacity for harm through the use of RA (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Participants noted that mistreatment from a close friend was more painful than mistreatment from someone who was not regarded as a close friend. The value assigned to the friendship determined the level of distress experienced. Ayesha and Ayanda both suggested that negative feedback and criticism from a close friend could be “taken to heart”. It could cause a girl to start doubting herself and have a significant impact on her self-esteem.

This is in accordance with research conducted by Anderson (2010), Hammel (2008), Rose et al. (2004) and Sesar et al. (2012), which indicates that RA can have a negative impact on the self-esteem of victims. During the interviews, it became apparent that each participant had, to some extent, experienced conflict or disruption in a close friendship. Their recollections revealed the profoundly negative emotional impact of these experiences. For instance, Jayshree recalled how the ending of a close friendship had contributed to her feelings of depression and apathy. For two to three months, she had no motivation to get out of bed, brush her hair or put on makeup. She lost interest in all the activities that she had loved doing before the friendship ended.

In another example, Diya described how a close friend led her into a dangerous situation. She was having a small party at her home, when her friend decided to invite a boy over. Diya’s friend then left her alone with the boy in a room and closed the door. Diya ended up being sexually assaulted. She was traumatised by the incident, which she blames on her friend’s interference.

This incident demonstrates that the legacy of unhealthy friendships characterised by RA can have a traumatic and long-lasting impact. It can also affect intimate relationships later on in life (Simmons, 2002). Indeed, as a young adult, years after the incident, Diya found that she was unable to forgive her friend and trust her again. She also explained that she had

experienced trust and intimacy issues in her first romantic relationship after high school. Physical contact with her new boyfriend had initially triggered distressing flashbacks of the traumatic incident. After learning about trauma at university, Diya finally began to cope with her symptoms and the harm caused by the incident.

5.3.2. Strategies for Dealing with Conflict

The participants' responses to conflict were explored using a hypothetical situation. The following question was posed to them: "If you found out that a friend was talking about you behind your back, how would you react?" The answers revealed that participants were careful to avoid confrontation. Confrontation was only used in specific cases and there were conditions attached to its use. If the friendship was not deemed as important to the participant, the idea of confrontation was immediately disregarded. In such a case, the act of RA could be ignored because it was not of great consequence to the participant.

Avoidance of confrontation is in accordance with conflict management strategies discussed in the literature. Researchers such as Simmons (2002) and Field (2006) suggest that girls will go to any length to avoid direct confrontation, as they are afraid of having to endure the consequence of being isolated and alone. The fear of isolation is so potent that it can result in girls enduring painful and emotionally abusive friendships. An explanation based on Social Role Theory (Eagly & Steffen, 1986) is that girls who comply with traditional gender roles strive to display feminine qualities such as caring and nurturing. They tend to avoid using direct ways of dealing with conflict. However, in this study, participants suggested that although they preferred to avoid confrontation, they engaged in it if the friendship was regarded as important to them. There were certain conditions attached to the use of confrontation, though. Immediate confrontation was avoided at all costs. A "cooling-off period" was used to allow the participant time to calmly assess the situation. To avoid hurting the offender's feelings and jeopardising the friendship, a diplomatic choice of words would be used.

The use of confrontation is consistent with the findings of Miller-Ott and Kelly's (2013) study on communication of female RA. The study consisted of a sample of 30 female college students, and the results suggested that management of conflict can be depicted along a continuum from withdrawal (ignoring the offender) to direct confrontation. One difference,

though, was that in Miller-Ott and Kelly's (2013) study, confrontation was generally described as a negative act. Individuals would seek the support of a third-party in order to confront a friend. Confrontation would be accompanied by yelling and accusations, with the result that the friendship was often terminated. This was not found to be the case in the current study.

The current study also revealed an association between confrontation and the balance of power in the friendship. Ayanda described confrontation as a mature way of discussing problems in the friendship. However, she also seemed to regard it as an act of "backing down" and surrendering one's power. She suggested that girls avoided confrontation in a friendship because they were reluctant to surrender their power.

There was also an expectation that confrontation would lead to forgiveness. This was regarded as a sign of vulnerability. In response to the question, "How do you deal with conflict in a friendship?" Maryam revealed that she was reluctant to engage in confrontation because it led to forgiving the other person, which was a sign of weakness.

To avoid relinquishing power in the friendship, RA was sometimes used as a form of conflict management. Ayanda mentioned subtle acts that women sometimes carried out, which allowed them to display feelings such as anger and disappointment toward a friend, without having to engage in confrontation. These acts included deliberately looking away from the friend, not hugging the friend and not smiling at the friend.

Katlego described an incident in which conflict arose because of competition for male attention. In a group of female friends, one of the girls formed a strong connection with the same boy that the Queen Bee was interested in. To express her anger and jealousy, the Queen Bee formed an alliance with other girls. The group engaged in social exclusion as a form of RA. They stopped speaking to the offender and prohibited others from speaking to her as well.

A study conducted by Crothers et al. (2005) provides confirmation for the idea that indirect forms of conflict management enable girls to retain their power and control in friendships. The sample comprised of 52 female high school students in the United States. Measures included the Relational Aggression Scale, the Bem Sex-Role Inventory and semi-structured

qualitative interviews. The findings suggested that girls tended to engage in relationally aggressive forms of conflict management such as spreading rumours and building alliances. These acts enabled girls to maintain power in their relationships while conforming to gender role expectations that girls discouraged girls from contributing to conflict or using direct methods such as confrontation to resolve conflict.

Field et al. (2006) concur that RA occurs in friendships when girls do not use assertive and direct methods of dealing with conflict. In such cases, they resort to the use of relationally aggressive acts to express feelings of anger towards a friend, or to chastise the friend for perceived wrongdoings or inappropriate behaviour. RA is also used to force a friend to comply with certain beliefs and behaviours.

The tenets of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) also provide an explanation for the development of RA as a conflict management strategy. Girls learn how to deal with conflict in their friendships through observational learning. For example, if a girl observes female role models in the immediate environment, such as her mother or her sister, using RA to express anger and frustration towards other women, she will imitate this behaviour in her friendships with other girls (Soenens et al., 2008).

5.4. Jealousy and Competition

Another core category identified was *Jealousy and Competition*, as these factors were described as rampant in female interactions. Girls were described as “jealous beings”, who competed with one another for exclusivity in friendships, attention from boys, academic achievement and social status.

Culotta and Goldstein (2008) conducted a study to examine how RA, physical aggression, and proactive prosocial behavior were associated with jealousy and social anxiety behaviour. The sample consisted of 60 high school students. The findings revealed a positive association between jealousy and RA, with jealous individuals showing a tendency to engage in RA.

The findings of the current study suggested that competition was widespread amongst females, suggesting that females engage in competition just as much as males do, though for potentially different reasons. According to Social Role Theory (Eagly & Steffen, 1986), the

traditional male gender role promotes aggression and competition, and these qualities are regarded as more desirable in men than in women. The traditional female gender role focuses less on aggression and more on nurturing and caring for others. Campbell (2004) asserts that competition is just as prevalent amongst women as it is amongst men. However, competition amongst women appears to manifest in a different way, often involving the use of RA. The author suggests that women turned to acts of RA as a safe way of engaging in competition, since such acts do not involve physical injury and are therefore difficult to detect. The victim is attacked in a circuitous manner and the perpetrator can remain unidentified.

The results of the current study indicated that according to the participants, jealousy and competition created an environment in which girls continuously criticised and judged each other. There was a lack of support and encouragement towards each other. This kind of environment was conducive to acts of RA such as eye-rolling and gossiping. Ayanda gave the example of how a beautiful girl was often perceived as stupid or mean by other girls. As a result of jealousy, the girl would be subjected to negative evaluation and criticism. Girls seemed to be reluctant to support each other or give each other sincere compliments.

5.5. Popularity and Idealised or Stereotypical Femininity

Competition was associated with the desire to be popular. The participants suggested that females competed with each other to gain the coveted social status of popularity. Girls who were perceived as popular were admired and envied by others. Katlego described the “Queen Bee” in her high school as a popular girl who was “skinny, beautiful” and desired by boys. Other girls wanted to emulate her. One girl, in particular, would cry in class because she envied the Queen Bee and coveted her status.

Definitions of popularity indicated a distinction between sociometric popularity and perceived popularity. This is consistent with the literature, which defines “sociometric popularity”, as being liked and admired by others, whilst “perceived popularity” refers to someone who is labelled as popular, but is not necessarily liked by others (Rose et al., 2004). This distinction is reflected in Diya’s definition of popularity. She suggested that from her experiences in high school, there were girls who were popular in the sense that they were well-known and thought of as popular. However, were not actually well-liked. Diya, on the

other hand, believed that she was popular because she was able to make friends easily and was well-liked by others.

Perceived popularity was associated with an idealised or stereotypical image of femininity. Girls who were perceived as popular strived to maintain this image through their dressing, following of trends and interactions with members of the opposite sex.

Currie et al. (2009) refer to perceived popularity as a culturally constructed way of performing girlhood that cuts across boundaries of race and class. It is associated with universal standards about femininity and behaviour that girls need to meet in order to gain social status. Idealised femininity dictates that girls must be pretty, it warns them about the dangers of putting on weight, and encourages them to strive for male attention. According to the authors, popularity “signals membership in the prized-and well-guarded-clique of an idealised femininity” (p.31).

Perceived popularity is a desired social status because it brings a sense of power and dominance over others (Petre, 2008). Power and dominance are used to govern the behaviour of others according to the boundaries of acceptable femininity. This is illustrated in Katlego’s description of the “matriarch” at university, a popular girl who exercised control over her followers’ actions. The “matriarch” dictated to her followers about where to go, what to do and what not to do. For example, if she decided not to attend a lecture, her followers would also not attend the lecture.

The study also revealed an association between perceived popularity and RA. When asked to define the mean girl, Lerato and Parveen both made a direct association between mean girl behaviour and perceived popularity. It was also suggested that girls who were perceived as popular used RA as a form of punishment. This punishment was meted out those individuals who were regarded as different, and who did not conform to the standards of idealised femininity. Arya described a hurtful experience in which she was victimised by popular girls, partly because of the attention she had received from a boy, but also because her interests differed from the interests of the other girls. It is interesting to note that Lerato’s experience was described from the perspective of a mean girl. In high school, she and her friends

targeted girls who did not fit in. These experiences seemed to confirm the idea of perceived popularity being used to target those who were different.

Alternatively, it was suggested that RA was sometimes used to gain acceptance and approval from popular girls. Arya acknowledged that she adopted some of the “snobby” and “catty” behaviours of the popular mean girls in her school, in an attempt to gain their acceptance.

The association between perceived popularity and RA is supported by the literature. Currie et al (2007) conducted a study amongst 71 girls between the ages of 11 and 16 at several Canadian schools. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants’ experiences at school and their relationships among peers. The findings revealed that perceived popularity was uniformly associated with RA. It was also linked with exercising power over others. In addition, Xie et al. (2002) conducted a study exploring the link between perceived popularity and aggression in sample of 475 grade 7 learners. The authors found a significant positive relationship between perceived popularity and RA.

It must be noted that not all participants in the current study associated RA with perceived popularity. From her experiences in high school, Katlego noted that popular girls did not always engage in mean girl behaviour. It can be argued, however, that Katlego did not experience RA in high school because she was able to protect herself from becoming a target. Despite the fact that she was regarded as different and belonged to an ‘out group’, she and her friends had a reputation of being tough, instead of weak and vulnerable. Thus, they were not exposed to punishment from mean girls.

Summary of Experiences of RA

The participants’ experiences of RA seemed to indicate that it arose mainly out of conflict in female friendships. Conflict in a close friendship appeared to be particularly distressing. RA was one of the indirect methods used to deal with conflict. Jealousy and competition for male attention, friendships, academic achievement and social status seemed to have a further impact on female relationships. Popularity and adherence to idealised or stereotypical notions of femininity resulted in the use of RA to achieve and maintain this desired social status.

5.6. Reflections on the Research Process

Reflexivity forms an essential component of qualitative research, and in particular, research from a feminist perspective (Jootun, McGee & Marland, 2009; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). In qualitative research, the researcher is regarded not as a neutral and objective observer, but as an inherently subjective observer who exerts an influence on the study. This influence can be both intentional as well as unintentional. Lien et al. (2014) describe reflexivity thus:

- *It is a reminder of the ambiguous and subjective nature of knowledge, despite attempts to uncover “facts”,*
- *It recognises that multiple perspectives impact on the understanding of a phenomenon, and*
- *The researcher’s subject position and subsequent influence on perceptions of the phenomenon being studied are acknowledged as far as possible.(p.191)*

According to Jootun et al. (2009), the values, beliefs, experience and interests of the researcher have an impact on the interpretation of data. This results in qualitative studies being prone to a degree of subjectivity. Reflexivity can assist in making the process more open and transparent. It is thus regarded as a crucial part in ensuring rigour in qualitative research. Furthermore, the aim of qualitative research is to understand social experiences. The researcher’s role is crucial in this process and can be described as “a bridge that allows the reader to enter the interviewee’s lived experience” (Lien et al., 2014, p.189). Research is often undertaken with the aim of contributing to knowledge and making a difference in the lives of others. In order to achieve this goal, the researcher must constantly make decisions about which questions to ask, which secrets to keep, and which experiences to document (Ellis, 2007). The reflexive researcher is therefore one who has a deep sense of self-awareness and is conscious of the fact that his or her epistemological, ontological, theoretical and personal assumptions have an impact on the phenomenon being studied (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

In particular, constructivist grounded theory advocates that researchers attempt to become aware of their preconceived notions and how these notions affect the research. Constructivism encourages researchers to reflect on their own interpretations of reality in

addition to the interpretations of the research participants. Without the use of reflexivity, researchers may erroneously regard their own assumptions and interpretations as objective. We need to acknowledge that at each stage of inquiry, our presuppositions affect the social processes of inquiry (Charmaz, 2006).

Mauthner and Doucet (2003), however, point out that there are limits to how reflexive and conscious we can be about our own influences on the research, both during data collection and after the data has been collected. The authors observe that “no matter how aware and reflexive we try to be, there are limits to reflexivity, and to the extent to which we can be aware of the influences on our research both at the time of conducting it and in the years that follow” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p.425). As researchers, our assumptions and emotions can sometimes be hidden and inaccessible to ourselves as well as to our participants. Nonetheless, this does not preclude us from striving to practise reflexivity. The narrative of my personal reflexivity is presented below.

At the commencement of data collection, I was anxious about whether participants would freely and openly discuss their experiences with me. As the topic was of a sensitive nature, I braced myself for a degree of reticence on the part of the participants. Furthermore, aside from the research interviews I conducted during my Honours year, I did not have much experience with qualitative interviewing.

However, my anxieties proved largely unfounded. In most of the interviews, participants willingly discussed their personal experiences, with little prompting on my part. Before asking probing questions, such as “How did it feel to watch RA being enacted in the film clips?” I informed participants that they could choose not to answer the question if they decided it was too intrusive. To my surprise, many of them answered these questions without hesitation.

This can be perhaps attributed to the fact I shared similar personal characteristics with participants, such as gender and age group. According to Broom, Hand and Tovey (2009), the personal characteristics of the researcher can have a significant impact on the research project. Thus, “an understanding of the range of interpersonal dynamics that can shape qualitative interview contexts is crucial if researchers are to produce high-quality analyses” (Broom et al., 2009, p.51). Feminist researchers have suggested that female interviewers are

more easily able to uncover the personal experiences of other women than male interviewers. Other characteristics such as age, ethnicity and social status are also regarded as influential factors in the interview setting. Since I shared similar characteristics with participants (gender, age group, level of education, and in most of the cases, race) it can be argued that this enabled participants to identify with me and allowed them to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with me.

I also strived to create an atmosphere of acceptance in order to make participants feel comfortable. I repeatedly stated my non-judgemental stance. In most of the interviews, this worked well and participants readily discussed their personal experiences. In other interviews, however, participants expressed unease with regard to how they were coming across during the interview. I had to reassure them that I was not judging them. In retrospect, perhaps I could have done more to reassure participants that they should not fear being judged for the statements they made. Despite the fact that I tried to constantly monitor participants' reactions for signs of discomfort, there were times when I may have gotten carried away by the need to collect information rather than display sensitivity to the participants' feelings.

At times I found myself having difficulty in adopting a non-judgemental stance towards participants who admitted to being perpetrators of RA. Although I ascribed to feminist ideals about gender equality, it became evident that I still held traditional notions about appropriate female behaviour and about how girls should strive to be 'nice' at all times. In this way, I was subconsciously reinforcing the stereotypical ideas of femininity that Lindsey and Christy (2011) regard as inherent in patriarchal societies. It was during my interview with Maryam, a self-confessed 'mean girl', that I first became aware of my own biases towards perpetrators of RA and made a conscious effort to avoid imposing these biases onto the study. I was reminded of Simmons' (2002) admonition that everyone has the capacity to inflict harm and that denying our own potential meanness results in perpetuating stereotypes about female aggression:

The belief that we are only victims or only bullies has caricatured the memories and discussions of girls' meanness. It has also helped many of us dismiss the complexity of our own behaviour. The upshot is that it's transformed "us against them" into "us against us." By washing our hands of our own capacity to injure, we perpetuate the

*stereotype that females are nonaggressive. By leaving these episodes in the private, emotional realm, by continuing to imagine those who have bullied us living in the gutter and falling off cliffs-and trust me, I have-we deprive alternative aggressions of a fair hearing and ourselves of a more honest sisterhood, because to put it out there would mean we have to admit to ourselves that inside we are all mean, that inside we are all aggressive. And girlfriends, **we are**. (p.151)*

The interviews thus challenged my preconceived ideas about femininity and aggressive behaviour. They also led to recollections of my own experiences with RA, both as a victim and a perpetrator. After all these years, the recollections were still hurtful, but hearing other women discuss similar experiences provided me with a measure of comfort, support and emotional release. These sentiments were echoed by most of the participants. Contrary to my earlier anxieties about whether participants would freely and openly discuss their experiences, they seemed to feel a sense of relief from being able to speak openly about their experiences. For some participants, this was the first time they had spoken about it to anyone else. This sense of relief is reflected in the extract below:

Jayshree: I just love talking about [laughs]-this is very like-I had all this stuff in my head but didn't speak about it so it was nice speaking about it now

Saajida: That's good

Jayshree: putting it into words felt good, you asked the right questions

This confirmed the importance of exploring personal accounts of RA in order to fully understand its effect on the lives of those who had experienced it. Given that RA is often regarded as a rite of passage for girls, people have become accustomed to dismissing it as normal or unimportant and denying its impact (Hammel, 2008). As such, many individuals do not speak about their experiences. Extracts such as the one above, however, indicate that speaking about these experiences can have a liberating and cathartic effect. Raising awareness about RA is the first step in finding effective ways to deal with the phenomenon. By asking young adult women to describe their personal accounts of RA, I hope that this study has provided fresh insight into the nature of RA. It is also my hope that this study will raise sufficient interest to stimulate further research on this topic, which is highly relevant to the study of human aggression.

5.7. Summary

This chapter contains an interpretation and discussion of the primary findings of the study. The aim of this study was to explore South African university students' understandings and experiences of RA. This resulted in the development of four core categories (*Normalised RA Amongst Females; Fragile Friendships; Jealousy and Competition; Popularity and Idealised or Stereotypical Femininity*) and five sub-categories (*Descriptions of RA; RA and Mean Girls; Explanations of RA; Conflict in Friendships; and Strategies for Dealing with Conflict*). These categories have been described in detail in this chapter and have been supplemented with quotes from the interviews and findings from the existing literature on RA. In general, the findings of the study seem to provide confirmation for the findings from the literature. The next chapter focuses on the final conclusions of the study and proposes recommendations for future research.

Chapter Six: Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter provides a discussion of the main conclusions drawn from the study as well as recommendations for future research. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was used to explore young South African women's understandings and experiences of RA. The findings provided support for the theoretical framework of the study, which comprised of Social Role Theory (Eagly & Steffen, 1986), Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and feminist interpretations of aggression (Currie et al., 2009; Goldberg et al., 2011; Ryalls, 2011). In accordance with most of the current literature on aggression, RA appeared to be prevalent and normative amongst females and emerged mainly in the context of conflict in female friendships. Jealousy and competition amongst girls also seemed to be common factors that were associated with the use of RA. Other major factors were popularity and adherence to an idealised or stereotypical image of femininity. It is hoped that this study will make a useful contribution to the body of literature on RA and provide an impetus for further research in this area.

6.1. Summary

This study explored the phenomenon of RA in a sample of South African female university students. The aim was to discover how RA was defined and understood by young adult women. To achieve this aim, I focused on two main research questions: "How is RA understood by young South African women?" and "What are some of the experiences they have had with RA?" The study arose out of the need for qualitative research on RA, as well as the need for research amongst adult samples in a diverse, non-Western context.

An exploratory, qualitative approach was thus selected for the study. This was located within the constructivist grounded theory method advocated by Charmaz (2006). The sample comprised of 16 female students between the ages of 18-25 at a university in Durban. The main findings suggested that RA was regarded as prevalent and normalised amongst young adult women. It was associated with challenges in female friendships. Although the participants seemed to regard these friendships as highly important, they also noted the potential for mistreatment and emotional harm. RA seemed to arise primarily from conflict

situations in female friendships. Female relationships also appeared to be complicated by issues of jealousy and competition for exclusivity in friendships, male attention, academic achievement and social status. The participants further suggested that competition developed from the desire to attain popularity, which was seen as a highly-prized social status. Popularity dictated adherence to an idealised or stereotypical conceptualisation of femininity. RA was used to achieve and maintain popularity, to gain acceptance from popular girls, as well as to punish those who did not conform to this idealised or stereotypical image of femininity.

6.2. Conclusion

The participants' answers to the research question, "How is RA understood by young South African women?" suggested that RA was understood as a pervasive and normal part of their interactions with other women. It was perceived as a natural component of female interactions, or as Priyanka described it, "the way girls are". It occurred from the primary school years through to university level. The participants regarded RA as being more common in interactions with women than in interactions with men, implying that there are gender differences in the use of aggression.

These findings support the general conclusions drawn from previous research (Anderson, 2010, Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, Doyle & McLoughlin, 2010, Goldberg, 2009), which indicate that there are gender differences in the use of aggression. Although both genders engage in RA, RA appears to be more prevalent amongst females, whilst overt forms of aggression, such as physical aggression, appear to be the favoured means of expressing emotion and resolving conflict amongst males (Goldberg, 2009). Girls also seem to experience the negative effects of RA more intensely than boys do (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Eliciting definitions of RA was sometimes difficult as the participants were not familiar with the term itself. However, they were familiar with the actions and behaviours represented by the term. They were also able to easily identify and define the term 'mean girl'. Each participant had come across a mean girl at some point in their lives, who seemed to have left a lasting impression on them. Some participants acknowledged that they had also engaged in mean girl behaviour. I got the sense that recalling this behaviour led to feelings of shame and

remorse. For example, Maryam acknowledged that she had carried out acts of RA. Her disclosures were accompanied by signs of discomfort, such as looking down or hesitating before answering. Maryam expressed concern about sounding “petty” and insensitive. Arya also expressed concern with how her words sounded. I had to reassure both participants that they could speak freely, as this was a safe and non-judgemental space for them to discuss their experiences.

I also asked the participants to discuss their understandings of how RA develops. They posited that RA developed as a result of “upbringing”, as socialisation practises in childhood contributed to the development of RA. Boys and girls were raised differently; boys were permitted to engage in physically aggressive and competitive behaviour, whilst girls were encouraged to be nurturing and caring. The use of physical aggression in boys was allowed, and girls were taught to avoid it at all costs. This led to girls turning to more covert forms of aggression, such as RA. The participants also made a connection between social learning and RA. They suggested that RA developed as a result of observing models such as parents or sibling enacting this type of behaviour. Films and television were also regarded as a source of observational learning. These ideas are consistent with the tenets of Social Role Theory, Social Learning Theory and feminist interpretations of RA, which form part of the theoretical framework of the study.

In response to the research question, “What are some of the experiences they have had with RA?” I found that the participants were able to give detailed accounts of their experiences. Each participant talked about how they had experienced RA as a victim or a target (or both). When I first began questioning them, their answers were brief and hesitant, but as the interview progressed and they became more comfortable, their answers became lengthy and detailed. The participants’ responses revealed that RA manifested in female friendships, jealousy and competition, as well as popularity and the notion of idealised femininity.

There was a sense that the participants had relegated their experiences to a small, unexamined corner of their memories. Discussing these experiences led to surprising insights about the impact they had, and continue to have, on the participants’ lives. Many of these experiences had been deeply upsetting at the time. The hurt, embarrassment and shame caused by these incidents led to them avoiding talking to anyone and simply trying to forget what had happened. As a result, this was the first time they were sharing these experiences with

someone and they spoke about the liberating effects of unburdening themselves in this manner. Their stories reflected the harmful impact of the culture of silence that enshrouds women's aggression.

The participants seemed to regard RA as a source of extreme emotional distress, implying that it held greater significance and consequence for girls than it did for boys. The effects of RA were perceived as worse than the effects of physical aggression. In accordance with the literature (Crothers et al., 2005; Goldberg, et al., 2011), the participants suggested that RA had the potential to inflict devastating harm on women, as a result of the high value that they placed on emotional connections with others.

The findings also indicated the long-term emotional impact of RA on victims. For instance, a traumatic incident in school led to Diya experiencing trust and intimacy issues when she was at university. Arya also described the traumatic long-term effects that she experienced as a result of RA. She found it difficult to make friends and trust people. Moreover, up until the age of twelve, she frequently contemplated suicide.

These findings are supported by the literature. Children and adolescents who experience RA are at higher risk for social maladjustment and psychological disorders. Victims of RA also experience low self-esteem, depression, loneliness and hostility from peers, and are at risk of engaging in self-injury and substance abuse (Anderson, 2010). Extreme cases of RA can lead to bullycide, or suicide that is committed as a result of being bullied (Ryalls, 2011). RA also has a negative impact on the academic performance of victims, leading to poor concentration in class and decreased interest in learning (Botha, 2014). Relationally aggressive children and adolescents experience frequent rejection by peers, loneliness and depression (Soenens et al., 2008). Field et al. (2006) also point out that continuous engagement in or exposure to RA can impact negatively on the social and psychological development of adolescent females, leading to maladaptive behaviours that can continue into adulthood.

The effects of RA can be devastating and long-lasting (Banks, 2012). Internalising such experiences can lead to psychological maladjustment in adulthood and disorders such as Borderline Personality Disorder and bulimia (Sesar et al., 2012). Girls who deal with conflict in covert ways during adolescence often carry these modes of expression into their later years (Goldberg et al., 2011). Perhaps most disturbingly, the legacy of unhealthy friendships

characterised by RA can have an impact on intimate relationships later on in life, priming girls to accept mistreatment as normal (Simmons, 2013).

There is a common saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me”. The evidence that has been cited in the literature on the negative effects of RA, as well as the personal experiences described by the participants in this study, bring into question the validity of this saying. The participants talked about the extremely painful nature of RA. There were times when words seemed inadequate to fully articulate their pain, but it was evident in their facial expressions and tone of voice. The participants seemed to echo Kuppens et al.’s (2013) assertion that RA is perhaps even more harmful than overt forms of aggression. Jayshree, for example, suggested that the emotional pain caused by RA was far worse than physical pain, as “nothing gets to a girl more than when you hurt her emotionally”.

Given the fact that RA has been associated with negative effects such as emotional distress, maladjustment and psychological disorders, one can argue that this phenomenon is extremely relevant for the field of psychology. The expertise of psychologists can be drawn on in order to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies. The therapeutic relationship can also serve as an example of a healthy relationship for clients who have been affected by RA. It can provide the client with “a safe setting in which she can experience and reciprocate equal power” (Goldberg, 2009, p.34). Group counselling can also be used to encourage support and collaboration amongst females. These sessions can allow them to share their experiences in a non-judgemental environment and gain comfort and support from other females. Together, they can gain perspective and devise ways to empower other women (Goldberg, 2009).

The current study was developed to address the gaps in the current research on aggression. It attempted to raise interest in the phenomenon of RA, in the hope that this will stimulate further research in order to increase our understanding of this type of aggression, which has been under-researched compared to overt forms of aggression. Given that researchers acknowledge the extremely harmful nature of unchecked RA, which can lead to adjustment difficulties, depression, anxiety and personality disorders, it is my hope that the findings of this study will provide useful information in the search for effective intervention strategies.

6.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Exploratory studies of this nature provide a starting point in understanding RA (Anderson, 2010). It is important to note that research on female aggression, with all its complexities, is still in the early stages (Hadley, 2004). Accordingly, there is a need for further research in order to fully explore RA. It is recommended that additional methods of data collection be considered in addition to the self-report methods used in this study. As Anderson (2010) notes, studies that rely on self-reports, despite assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, might cause reluctance on the part of participants to provide honest accounts of their own experiences of being a victim or perpetrator of RA. In addition, face-to-face interviewing can sometimes cause the participant to become self-conscious, reducing the possibility that they will discuss information that portrays them in a negative light. As mentioned above, evidence of this can be found in the present study. In interviews with Maryam and Arya, both participants seemed to become self-conscious when describing their own roles in perpetrating RA.

Further research could also explore the different functions of aggression. According to Czar, Dahlen, Bullock and Nicholson (2011), including a measure of the functions of aggression, such as reactive or proactive aggression, could assist in further clarifying the nature of RA. It has also been suggested that future research needs to focus specifically on the adjustment difficulties associated with RA (Anderson, 2010). Future research could also explore ways of effectively preventing or intervening in RA, in order to encourage girls to find healthier modes of expressing their negative emotions and resolving conflict. Reducing RA could, in turn, lead to the reduction of other forms of aggression in schools and universities, and enable the creation of environments which are conducive to teaching and learning (Botha, 2014). Research on how RA is shaped and maintained in specific environments is crucial to developing successful interventions. Young et al. (2006) suggest that further research that carefully considers the subtle and not-so-subtle contexts of RA would be useful. The authors add that although researchers are aware of the existence of RA, we do not completely understand the contexts that create and maintain its use. There is a need for additional research in order to fully understand RA from both an individual and a system perspective. This could assist in ensuring that the voices of girls are heard, and end the silence around issues of female aggression. As Simmons (2002, p.3) suggests, the time has come to end the silence around women's experiences, and in particular, their experiences of aggression.

References

- Anderson, H.J. (2010). *'Mean girls', bystanders and their victims: An investigation into relational aggression amongst girls, from a developmental perspective*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Kwazulu-Natal).
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. New York: General Learning Press.
- Banks, E. (2012). *Prevalence and Gender Differences of Relational Aggression in High School Students* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin--Stout).
- Berg, J.M., Wrzesniewski, A., & Dutton, J.E. (2010). Perceiving and responding to challenges in job crafting at different ranks: when proactivity requires adaptivity. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 31*, 158–186.
- Botha, J. (2014). Relational aggression: the voices of primary school learners. *South African Journal of Education, 34*(2), 1-15.
- Bowen, G.A. (2006). Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts. *International journal of qualitative methods, 5*(3), 12-23.
- Bradley, J. (1993). Methodological issues and practices in qualitative research. *The Library Quarterly, 63*(4), 431-49.
- Brock, C.H., Oikonomidou, E.M., Wulfing, K., Pennington, J.L., & Obenchain, K.M. (2014). "Mean girls" go to college: Exploring female–female relational bullying in an undergraduate literacy methods course. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 20*(4), 516-535.

- Broom, A., Hand, K., & Tovey, P. (2009). The role of gender, environment and individual biography in shaping qualitative interview data. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 12(1), 51-65.
- Brown, L. M. (2005). *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bushman, B.J., & Huesmann, L.R. (2012). Aggression. In S. T. Fiske, D. T. Gilbert, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Bussey, K., & Bandura, A. (1999). Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation. *Psychological review*, 106(4), 676-713.
- Button, D.M., & Gealt, R. (2010). High risk behaviors among victims of sibling violence. *Journal of Family Violence*, 25, 131–140.
- Cahoj, J.B. (2011). *Reducing the Effects of Bullying in Adolescence: The Role of Schools and Families*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kansas State University).
- Campbell, A. (1999). Staying alive: Evolution, culture and women's intrasexual aggression. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 22(2), 203-214.
- Card, N.A., Stucky, B.D., Sawalani, G.M., & Little, T.D. (2008). Direct and indirect aggression during childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic review of gender differences, intercorrelations, and relations to maladjustment. *Child Development*, 79(5), 1185 – 1229.
- Carlo, G., Raffaelli, M., Laible, D.J., & Meyer, K.A. (1999). Why are girls less physically aggressive than boys? Personality and parenting mediators of physical aggression. *Sex Roles*, 40(9-10), 711-729.
- Cecil, D.K. (2008). From *Heathers* to *Mean Girls*: An examination of relational aggression in film. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 15 (3), 262-276.

- Charmaz, K. (1996). The search for meanings-grounded theory. In J.A. Smith, R. Harre, & L. Van Lagenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* (pp. 27-49). London: Sage Publications.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Charmaz, K. (2008). Constructionism and the grounded theory method. In J.A. Holstein & J.F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 397-412). New York: The Guildford Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2012). The power and potential of grounded theory. *Medical Sociology Online*, 6(3), 2-15.
- Cho, J.Y., & Lee, E.H. (2014). Reducing confusion about grounded theory and qualitative content analysis: Similarities and differences. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(32), 1-20.
- Clammer, J. (2012). *Corruption: Expanding the Focus*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Corwin, E.P. (2014). *An evaluation of the effectiveness of the check in/check out intervention for students engaging in relational aggression and their classmates*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama).
- Coyne, S.M., Archer, J., & Eslea, M. (2004). Cruel intentions on television and in real life: Can viewing indirect aggression increase viewers' subsequent indirect aggression? *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 88, 234–253.
- Coyne, S.M., Archer, J., & Eslea, M. (2006). “We’re not friends anymore! Unless...”: The frequency and harmfulness of indirect, relational, and social aggression. *Aggressive Behaviour*, 32, 294–307.
- Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development*, 66(3), 710-722.

- Crick, N.R., Casas, J.F., & Ku, H.C. (1999). Relational and physical forms of peer victimization in preschool. *Developmental psychology*, 35(2), 376-395.
- Crick, N.R., & Nelson, D.A. (2002). Relational and physical victimization within friendships: Nobody told me there'd be friends like these. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 30, 599-607.
- Crick, N.R., Ostrov, J.M., Appleyard, K., Jansen, E.A., & Casas, J.F. (2004). Relational aggression in early childhood: "You can't come to my birthday party unless..." In M. Putallaz & K.L. Bierman (Eds.). *Aggression, Antisocial Behavior, and Violence Among Girls: A Developmental Perspective Duke Series in Child Development and Public Policy*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Crothers, L.M., Field, J.E., & Kolbert, J.B. (2005). Navigating power, control, and being nice: Aggression in adolescent girls' friendships. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 83, 349-354.
- Culotta, C.M., & Goldstein, S.E. (2008). Adolescents' aggressive and prosocial behavior: Associations with jealousy and social anxiety. *The Journal of genetic psychology*, 169(1), 21-33.
- Currie, D.H., Kelly, D.M., & Pomerantz, S. (2007). 'The power to squash people': Understanding girls' relational aggression. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(1), 23-37.
- Currie, D., Kelly, D.M., & Pomerantz, S. (2009). *'Girl power': Girls reinventing girlhood*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Czar, K.A., Dahlen, E.R., Bullock, E.E., & Nicholson, B.C. (2011). Psychopathic personality traits in relational aggression among young adults. *Aggressive behavior*, 37(2), 207-214.
- Delgado, I.R. (2011). *Bridging the gap: Relational aggression in the college environment*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, City University of New York).

- Doyle, H.S., & McLoughlin, C.S. (2010). Do science and common wisdom collide or coincide in their understanding of relational aggression? *Frontiers in psychology, 1*, 1-10.
- Eagly, A.H., & Steffen, V.J. (1986). Gender and aggressive behavior: A meta-analytic Review of the social psychological literature. *Psychological Bulletin, 100*(3), 309-330.
- Eisenbraun, K.D. (2007). Violence in schools: Prevalence, prediction, and prevention. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour, 12*(4), 459-469.
- Erikson, E.H. (1968). *Youth: Identity and Crisis*. New York: WW Norton & Company.
- Field, J.E., Crothers, L.M., & Kolbert, J.B. (2006). Fragile friendships: Exploring the use and effects of indirect aggression among adolescent girls. *Journal of School Counseling, 4*, 1-25.
- Field, J.E., Kolbert, J.B., Crothers, L.M., & Hughes, T.L. (2009). *Understanding girl bullying and what to do about it: Strategies to help heal the divide*. California: Corwin Press.
- Fifield, A.O. (2010). *College professors' perceptions of and responses to relational aggression in college students*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Auburn University).
- Flick, U. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Ford, K. (2010). *Reframing a sense of self: a constructivist grounded theory study of children's admission to hospital for surgery*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Tasmania).
- Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F., & Davidson, L. (2002). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Australian and New Zealand journal of psychiatry, 36*(6), 717-732.

- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gilligan, C., & Brown, L.M. (1992). Meeting at the crossroads: Women's psychology and girls' development. *Feminism & Psychology*, 3(1), 11-35.
- Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goldberg, R.M. (2009). *Psychological warfare: The media and relational aggression amongst female college students*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Florida).
- Goldberg, R.M., Smith-Adcock, S., & Dixon, A.L. (2011). The influence of the mass media on relational aggression among females: A feminist counseling perspective. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 20(4), 376-394.
- Goldstein, N. (2008). *The associated press stylebook and libel manual, fully updated and revised*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Govender, M. (2007). *An investigation into the phenomena of bullying and violence in secondary schools in Durban (Umlazi and Merebank)*. (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Kwazulu-Natal).
- Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and "ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative Enquiry*, 10(2), 262-280.
- Guy, S. (2009). *An investigation of the relationships between self-efficacy, peer relations and conflict resolution strategies in female adolescent bullying behaviour*. (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Kwazulu-Natal).
- Hadley, M. (2004). Relational, indirect, adaptive, or just mean: Recent Studies on aggression in adolescent girls-part II. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 5(3), 331-350.

- Hamilton, R.C. (2010). *Relational aggression and the impact it has on female adolescents*. (Unpublished master's thesis, State University of New York).
- Hammel, L.R. (2008). Bouncing back after bullying: The resiliency of female victims of relational aggression. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 21(2), 3-14.
- Handcock, M.S., & Gile, K.J. (2011). Comment: On the concept of snowball sampling. *Sociological Methodology*, 41(1), 367-371.
- Hess, N. H., & Hagen, E. H. (2006). Sex differences in indirect aggression: Psychological evidence from young adults. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 27(3), 231-245.
- Holiday, E., & Rosenberg, J.I. (2009). *Mean girls, meaner women: Understanding why women backstab, betray and trash-talk each other and how to heal*. California: Createspace Independent Publishing.
- Huntley, J. & Owens, L. (2006). "I know they are manipulating me..." Unmasking indirect aggression in an adolescent girls' friendship group: A case study. *International Education Journal*, 7(4), 514-523.
- Jackson, R.L., Drummond, D.K., & Camara, S. (2007). What is qualitative research? *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 8(1), 21-28.
- Jones, M., & Alony, I. (2011). Guiding the use of grounded theory in doctoral studies-an example from the Australian film industry. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 6, 95-114.
- Jootun, D., McGee, G., & Marland, G.R. (2009). Reflexivity: promoting rigour in qualitative research. *Nursing Standard*, 23(23), 42-46.
- Kolbert, J.B., Field, J.E., Crothers, L.M., & Schreiber, J.B. (2010). Femininity and depression mediated by social and relational aggression in late adolescence. *Journal of School Violence*, 9, 289-302.

- Kotze, L.E (2007). *Adolescent girls' peer conflicts: Friendship and relational aggression*. (Unpublished honours research project, University of Cape Town).
- Krueger, K.S., Rao, M., Salzer, J., & Saucerman, J.C. (2011). College-age women and relational-aggression: Prevalence and impact. *Wisconsin Women's Studies Consortium Women and Gender Studies Conference*, 1-8.
- Kuppens, S., Laurent, L., Heyvaert, M., & Onghena, P. (2013). Associations between parental psychological control and relational aggression in children and adolescents: A multilevel and sequential meta-analysis. *Developmental psychology*, 49(9), 1697-1700.
- Lagerspetz, K. M., Bjorkqvist, K., & Peltonen, T. (1988). Is indirect aggression typical of females? Gender differences in aggressiveness in 11–12 year old children. *Aggressive Behavior*, 14, 403–414.
- Lansford, J.E., Skinner, A.T., Sorbring, E., Giunta, L.D., Deater-Deckard, K., Dodge, K.A., & Chang, L. (2012). Boys' and girls' relational and physical aggression in nine countries. *Aggressive behavior*, 38(4), 298-308.
- Le Roux, C.S., & Mokhele, P.R. (2011). The persistence of violence in South Africa's schools: In search of solutions. *Africa Education Review*, 8(2), 318-335.
- Lindsey, L.L., & Christy, S. (2011). *Gender roles: A sociological perspective*. United States: Pearson.
- Locher, B., & Prügl, E. (2001). Feminism and constructivism: worlds apart or sharing the middle ground? *International Studies Quarterly*, 45(1), 111-129.
- Loudin, J.L., Loukas, A., & Robinson, S. (2003). Relational aggression in college students: Examining the roles of social anxiety and empathy. *Aggressive Behaviour*, 29, 430–439.

- Lunsford, L.M. (2014). *Female relational aggression: A case study investigation of the transitioning out process*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Liberty University).
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G.B. (2010). *Designing qualitative research*. California: Sage.
- Mavetera, N., & Kroeze, J.H. (2009). Practical considerations in grounded theory research. *Sprouts: Working Papers on Information Systems*, 9(32), 9-32.
- McEvoy, M.A., Estrem, T.L., Rodriguez, M.C., & Olson, M.L. (2003). Assessing relational and physical aggression among preschool children: Intermethod agreement. *Topics In Early Childhood Special Education*, 23(2), 53-63.
- Meyer, M., Stern, D., & Waldron, L. (2008). Interrogating mean girls: Feminist implications of mediated representations of alternative aggression. *Conference Papers- National Communication Association*, 1-29.
- Michiels, D., Grietens, H., Onghena, P., & Kuppens, S. (2008). Parent-child interactions and relational aggression in peer relationships. *Developmental Review*, 28, 522-540.
- Miller-Ott, A. E., & Kelly, L. (2013). Communication of female relational aggression in the college environment. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 14(1), 19-27.
- Mills, J., Bonner, A., & Francis, K. (2006). The development of constructivist grounded theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 1-10.
- Morrow, S.L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counselling psychology. *Journal of counseling psychology*, 52(2), 250.
- Murray-Close, D., Ostrov, J.M., Nelson, D.A., Crick, N.R., & Coccaro, E.F. (2010). Proactive, reactive, and romantic relational aggression in adulthood: Measurement, predictive validity, gender differences, and association with Intermittent Explosive Disorder. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 44(6), 393-404.

- Nelson, D.A., & Crick, N.R. (2002). Parental psychological control: Implications for childhood physical and relational aggression. *Intrusive Parenting: How Psychological Control Affects Children and Adolescents, 1*, 161-189.
- Nelson, D.A., Springer, M.M., Nelson, L.J., & Bean, N.H. (2008). Normative beliefs regarding aggression in emerging adulthood. *Social Development, 17*(3), 638-660.
- Olweus, D. (2003). A profile of bullying at school. *Educational Leadership, 60*(6), 12-17.
- Olweus, D. (2007). *The Olweus bullying questionnaire*. Minnesota: Hazelden.
- O'Neil, S. (2010). *Writing a literature review: A guide for Mcom (HRM/IP) students*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- Pellegrini, A.D., & Long, J.D. (2003). A sexual selection theory longitudinal analysis of sexual segregation and integration in early adolescence. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 85*(3), 257-278.
- Penning, S.L. (2009). *The relationship between bullying and trauma among adolescent male learners*. (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Kwazulu-Natal).
- Penning, S.L., Bhagwanjee, A., & Govender, K. (2010). Bullying boys: The traumatic effects of bullying in male adolescent learners. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 22*(2), 131-143.
- Petre, E. (2008). "You can't sit with us, bitch": Understanding girls' aggression in teen movies. *Conference Papers -National Communication Association, 1-27*.
- Prilleltensky, I., & Nelson, G. (2002). *Doing psychology critically: Making a difference in diverse settings*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Prinstein, M.J., Boergers, J., & Vernberg, E.M. (2001). Overt and relational aggression in adolescents: Social-psychological adjustment of aggressors and victims. *Journal of clinical child psychology, 30*(4), 479-491.

- Pronk, R.E., & Zimmer-Gembeck, M.J. (2010). It's "mean," but what does it mean to adolescents? Relational aggression described by victims, aggressors, and their peers. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 25(2), 175-204.
- Remillard, A.M., & Lamb, S. (2005). Adolescent girls' coping with relational aggression. *Sex Roles*, 53(3-4), 221-228.
- Reynolds, B.M., & Repetti, R.L. (2010). Teenage girls' perceptions of the functions of relationally aggressive behaviours. *Psychology in the Schools*, 47(3), 282-296.
- Ringrose, J. (2006). A new universal mean girl: Examining the discursive construction and social regulation of a new feminine pathology. *Feminism & Psychology*, 16, 405-424.
- Rose, A.J., Swenson, L.P., & Waller, E.M. (2004). Overt and relational aggression and perceived popularity: Developmental differences in concurrent and prospective relations. *Developmental Psychology*, 40(3), 378-387.
- Russell, B., Kraus, S.W., & Ceccherini, T. (2010). Student perceptions of aggressive behaviors and predictive patterns of perpetration and victimization: The role of age and sex. *Journal of School Violence*, 9(3), 251-270.
- Ryalls, E.D. (2011). *The culture of mean: Gender, race, and class in mediated images of girls' bullying*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida).
- Sbaraini, A., Carter, S.M., Evans, R.W., & Blinkhorn, A. (2011). How to do a grounded theory study: a worked example of a study of dental practices. *BMC medical research methodology*, 11(1), 1-10.
- Sesar, K., Barisic, M., Pandza, M., & Dodaj, A. (2012). The relationship between difficulties in psychological adjustment in young adulthood and exposure to bullying behaviour in childhood and adolescence. *Acta medica academica*, 41(2), 131-144.

- Simmons, R. (2002). *Odd girl out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Soenens, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Goossens, L., Duriez, B., & Niemiec, C. P. (2008). The intervening role of relational aggression between psychological control and friendship quality. *Social Development, 17*(3), 661-681.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology. *Handbook of Qualitative Research, 273-285*.
- Swart, E., & Bredekamp, J. (2009). Non-physical bullying: Exploring the perspectives of grade 5 girls. *South African Journal of Education, 29*(3), 405-425.
- Ulin, P.R., Robinson, E.T., Tolley, E.E., & McNeill, E.T. (2002). *Qualitative methods: A field guide for applied research in sexual and reproductive health*. Family Health International: North Carolina, USA.
- Werner, N.E., & Crick, N.R. (1999). Relational aggression and social-psychological adjustment in a college sample. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 108*(4), 615-623.
- Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed.). New York: Open University Press.
- Wiseman, R. (2009). *Queen bees and wannabes: Helping your daughter survive cliques, gossip, boyfriends, and the new realities of girl world*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Xie, H., Swift, D.J., Cairns, R.B., & Cairns, B.D. (2002). Aggressive behaviors in social interaction and developmental adaptation: A narrative analysis of interpersonal conflicts during early adolescence. *Socialdevelopment, 11*, 205–224.
- Young, E.L., Boye, A.E., & Nelson, D.A. (2006). Relational Aggression: Understanding, identifying, and responding in schools. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*(3), 297-312.

Appendix One: Interview Schedule

Questions probing for understandings of RA

First Layer of Questioning

General understanding of Relational Aggression (RA)

What do you understand by “RA” and “mean girls”?

Clarifications/probes

- What do you think about the clips we’ve just watched?
- What are the first thoughts that come to mind?
- How would you describe RA?
- How did it feel to watch RA being enacted in the film clips?
- Who, in your opinion, is a “mean girl”? Please describe an example of a mean girl.
- What do you think are the reasons for her behaviour?

Second Layer of Questioning (asked after first layer has been exhausted)

Personal Experiences of RA

Can you describe your experiences with RA?

Clarifications/probes:

- Let’s discuss some of your experiences in school. Have you ever witnessed or experienced RA in school?
- Who were the perpetrators of RA?
- Who were the victims?
- How did the popular girls in your school behave?
- How is RA carried out at university? Have you witnessed or experienced RA at university?

RA and Friendships

How does RA affect female friendships?

Clarifications/probes

- What, in your opinion, is a healthy friendship?
- How would you describe an unhealthy friendship?
- What have your friendships with other girls been like?

- Have you ever had a friendship that became disrupted in any way? Please explain.
- How do you deal with conflict in a friendship? For example, if you found out that a friend was talking about you behind your back, how would you react?
- How have your friendships changed since entering university?

Third Layer of Questioning (asked after second layer has been exhausted)

Lessons Learned from Experiences with RA

What have you learned from your experiences with RA?

Clarifications/probes

- What, in your opinion, causes people to engage in RA?
- What would you say to someone who is experiencing RA?
- What can be done to address the problem of RA?

Appendix Two – A : Informed Consent

Topic: Words Will Always Hurt Me: South African University Students' Perspectives on Female RA.

Dear Participant,

I request your participation in my research project.

The aim of the project is to explore the issue of Relational Aggression (RA) amongst females. RA is a form of bullying that is covert and indirect, and occurs mainly amongst females. It consists of subtle acts such as gossiping, exclusion, and spreading rumours. Participating in this study means that I will interview you about your understanding and experiences of RA. You have been selected as a potential participant because you fit the selection criteria (South African female, university student, over the age of eighteen).

There are a few things that you should be aware of before you agree to participate:

- Participation in this study is completely voluntary.
- You may choose to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences.
- The sessions will be audio- recorded (for research purposes ONLY).
- Your participation will be anonymous. You will be given a pseudonym which will be used in the transcription of the interviews. This pseudonym will also be used in all writing, presentation and publication of this work.
- My supervisor and I are the only people who will have access to the tape recordings. These will be locked in a safe and kept with the supervisor, and the tapes will be incinerated and the transcripts shredded after five years.
- If you feel upset or distressed in any way after the interviews, counselling is available from a psychologist at the Student Counselling Centre or the Psychology Clinic on

campus. If you wish, I can make an appointment for you. I have also provided their contact details if you prefer to contact them on your own.

-The Student Counselling Centre: 031 260 2668

-The Psychology Clinic: 031 260 7613

- There are no monetary or academic benefits for participating in the study. However, you will be contributing valuable insight into the topic of RA.
- Once the data has been analysed, the results will be emailed to you and you will be requested to verify the authenticity of the findings.
- You are required to read and understand the above points before you sign your consent.

If you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact either myself or my supervisor.

Regards,

SaajidaKharwa

208512861

Contact Details:

Ms. Cynthia Patel Supervisor: School of Psychology Tel: 031-2607619 patelc@ukzn.ac.za	Ms. PhumeleleXimba Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Office Tel: 031-2603587 Ximbap@ukzn.ac.za	Miss SaajidaKharwa Researcher Cell: 0766896091 Saajida26@gmail.com
---	---	---

Appendix Two – B: Declaration of informed consent

I, _____ volunteer to participate in this research study:

Words Will Always Hurt Me: South African University Students' Experiences of Female Relational Aggression.

I understand that I will be required to participate an interview.

Please tick the correct option:

I hereby Agree Do Not Agree to be audio recorded in this study.

I am aware that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences.

I also understand that my anonymity and confidentiality will be protected at all times and I will be given a pseudonym in the transcription, write- up and publication of findings.

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix Three: Ethical Clearance



18 November 2014

Mr Saajida Kharwa 208512861
School of Applied Human Sciences – Psychology
Howard College Campus

Protocol reference number: HSS/1259/014M

Project title: Words Will Always Hurt Me: South African University Students' Experiences of Female Relational aggression.

Dear Mr Kharwa

Expedited Approval

In response to your application dated 02 October 2014, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol have been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

Please note: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

/px

cc Supervisor: Ms Cynthia Patel
cc Academic Leader Research: Professor D McCracken
cc School Administrator: Ms Ausie Luthuli

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 3587/9350/4567 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 4809 Email: smloab@ukzn.ac.za / govmanov@ukzn.ac.za / troung@ukzn.ac.za

Website: www.ukzn.ac.za



Pietermaritzburg Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville