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Examining School Counselors' Lived Experiences of Relational Aggression in African American Girls

Crystal Holt
Walden University

Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Crystal Shunae Holt

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Review Committee
Dr. Katarzyna Peoples, Committee Chairperson, Counselor Education and Supervision Faculty
Dr. Laura Smestad, Committee Member, Counselor Education and Supervision Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

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Abstract

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M.Ed., Georgia Southern University, 2008

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Since the early 1990s, there have been examinations of the predictors of Relational Aggression (RA) in girls, but many questions remain unanswered that contribute to the lived experiences of school counselors addressing RA. RA is best defined as behavior that is deliberate and unfriendly, with the intent to cause harm to others through verbal, social, and emotional control. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of school counselors addressing RA in African American girls. A hermeneutic phenomenological lens was used to examine the individual perceptions of eight school counselors. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the lived experiences of these participants. The results of this study revealed powerful descriptions of the participants' experiences, while also revealing the importance of building meaningful and lasting connections with these students. The rich and deep depictions of each counselor's accounts of addressing this phenomenon revealed that African American girls who exhibit signs of RA, as either victims or perpetrators, are viewed and treated in much less favorable ways than their peers of other races. Future research that focuses on training school staff in the areas of cultural competence and sensitivity, as well as revising current antibullying policies to reflect terminology and examples of RA may provide additional benefits to African American girls. Social change implications for school counselors and others who shape and mold the futures of school-age AA girls include providing more education and advice on how to seek assistance on the topic of RA. Creating mentorship opportunities that focus on student empowerment and prosocial behaviors will also support these students.

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Dedication

I proudly dedicate this dissertation to my one and only son, Kamden. May you grow to understand that the true purpose of the countless hours and tears poured into creating this masterpiece was all for you. I love you beyond measure and cannot wait to see what your future holds. Additionally, to all the Black girls and women around the world whose tenacity and assertiveness are often mistaken for attitude or being difficult to work with; know that you should never dim your light for anyone. Keep speaking up and keep showing up. Most importantly, keep being you, unapologetically! Black Girl Magic is indeed a real thing, and it lives inside of you!

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To my family and friends, I appreciate all your love, prayers, and motivation during this process. To my mother, Joyce, thank you for being a major support with Kamden and a prayer warrior even in times when I didn't know. I am immensely blessed to have you all as my support system. Thank you to my Soror, turned friend, Cherieda, for all your support and guidance throughout this process. Your assistance and advice have been invaluable. Lastly, I would like to thank each participant who took part in this study. Your contribution to the forward movement of this topic has been both rich and meaningful. I have no doubt that your insights will help provide the change the trajectory of how others view and address the topic of RA.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The relationships that children develop with their peers are directly associated with multiple aspects of their social development and adjustment. The interactions that take place within peer groups and social interactions affect the development of children's lives in familial, educational, and community settings (Ladd &Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2019). This further impacts the functioning within peer groups as relationships undergo transformation in systematic ways as children age and mature. During primary school years, many factors become relevant in the social world of children. This shift affords a new opportunity for social and emotional growth. By the time a child reaches middle school, more than 40% of their social interactions will involve interaction with peers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). During formative years, likeability and social acceptance begin to emerge. The importance of these only grows as the child gets older. These factors introduce a form of aggression that thrives on the importance of relationships and social status: relational aggression (RA).

RA has become a growing act of nonphysical violence and bullying among youth today. This term, as defined by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) involves the exclusion or isolation from friendship or group activities to damage one's reputation and social status, exhibited in children as young as preschool age. RA has been found to be associated with deficits for both the victims and the perpetrators such as limited critical thinking skills, inability to regulate emotions, and difficulty establishing healthy peer relationships (Leff et al., 2010). The act of RA is most often associated with behaviors exhibited in females as opposed to males due to its less physical and more subtle nature. RA is very covert,

often going undetected in many instances and in various settings (Smokowski & Evans, 2019).

Over time, studies have revealed that American children ranging from ages 8 to 15 years rate bullying as being a greater problem than racism, pressure to have sex, or use of alcohol and other drugs (Lyznicki et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2020). Research currently shows that more than 30% of students in the United States have experienced some form of aggression in roles as either the victim or the perpetrator (Nansel et al. & Scheidt, 2001, Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010; Smokowski et al., 2013). In fact, one out of every three school children are bullied mentally, physically, or verbally (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013).

In recent years, there have been examinations of the predictors of RA in girls (school counselor perceptions, parental involvement, familial relationships, socioeconomic status, etc.), but many questions have yet to be answered as to how these elements contribute to the development of RA in girls. More specifically, questions exist on how the lived experiences of school counselors affect their approaches to addressing RA. In a study by Xu et al (2020), it was reported that African American students reported not feeling connected to school and school officials. These students were also said to refrain from reporting bullying as often due to the lack of connectedness to school. It is thought that school counselors sometimes have a challenging time addressing RA for a variety of reasons. RA is most prevalent in females, but a gap in literature exists surrounding the factors directly associated with the role school counselors play in combating this more covert form of aggression. Swank et al. (2018) examined the roles

school counselors play in combating bullying and aggression. They revealed the way school counselors perceived their roles in addressing bullying behaviors directly conflicted with how most of the participants felt their principals perceived their roles in addressing these behaviors.

Aggression is a pervasive problem in schools and has been found to have a lasting negative impact on the learning environment (Swank et al., 2018; Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Because RA has previously gone undetected because of traditional views of many adults who view the actions as normal behavior, many students are reporting that they are victims of bullying and harassment. The boys will be boys, girls will be girls' mentality is a major indicator for the obliviousness of the less physical, more covert form that has developed into RA. For instance, behaviors of ignoring and exclusion from peer groups were previously viewed as typical behaviors that children exhibit and thus not viewed as a form of bullying or aggression by some adults (Sawyer et al., 2011). Consequently, a survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2013) revealed that over 80% of female students have reported being harassed in school. Rumors, gossip, social isolation, and ostracism are all forms of RA that are exhibited in schools across the nation daily (Leff et al., 2001; Taylor, 2008; Underwood, 2003). Numerous studies revealed that students have reported witnessing these behaviors in classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, and in bathrooms (Kuppens et al., 2008; Low et al., 2010).

There are many factors that are said to contribute to the use of RA. Gender, environmental, ecological, and developmental factors are all said to contribute to the use of RA. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) found that girls are more likely to exhibit relationally

aggressive behaviors than boys. One reason for this finding was that girls view social relationships as more important than boys, especially at the adolescent stage of development. The current depiction of girls in today's media shows that at even younger ages than before girls are mimicking historically stereotypical female behaviors such as spiteful attitudes, giving dirty looks, manipulation, and eye rolling (Linder & Werner, 2012). This behavior is becoming viewed by younger audiences of females (7-9 years old) as a normal and acceptable way to behave. In fact, research supports this notion in findings that suggest 92% of the current popular shows viewed by young audiences have some form of RA (Martins & Wilson, 2012). Therefore, the extant study is vital to help shed light on the many unanswered questions surrounding why RA remains so prevalent. Furthermore, illuminating the lived experiences of these school counselors combatting RA may help to better understand what is needed to address RA in African American girls.

Problem Statement

Aggression and bullying are topics that were previously viewed as problems in males because of the overt and physical nature that is often thought of when aggression and bullying are referenced (Hazler et al., 2001). In more recent years however, the covert RA that is most common among females has become much more noticeable with an alarming presence (Singletary & Johnson, 2020). One probable cause for increased interest in RA is that media depictions of young girls behaving in mean, catty ways are becoming more and more popular (Carter Andrews, Brown, Castro, and Id-Deen, 2019). These representations now highlight the gain of social status and popularity through the

young stars' use of relationally aggressive tactics (Jiménez & Estévez, 2017). Historically mistaken for typical adolescent behavior, RA can be best defined as behavior that is deliberate and unfriendly, with the intent to cause harm to another person through verbal, social, and emotional control (Merrell et al., 2006; Young et al., 2006). Viewers are left with no choice except to acknowledge that RA can indeed be a profoundly fundamental problem with deadly effects, especially if it is continued over time (Heilbron & Prinstein, 2010; Merrell et al., 2006). An additional probable cause of continued RA is the lack of proper knowledge and training of adults who are expected to combat bullying and aggressive behaviors.

The effects of RA can be equally as harmful as the effects of physical aggression because females view friendships and social status as more important than males do and they are most affected by RA (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). Effects of RA have been shown to cause mental and emotional damage to those on the receiving end, leaving the possibility of more harmful lasting effects than physical aggression (Hottle et al., 2011). Males typically display their aggression in more overt and physical forms, while girls who were previously not thought of as being aggressive often display their aggression through the more discreet forms that include the gossip or ignoring of peers (Hottle et al., 2011).

An increase in technology and the use of social networks have provided other avenues to exhibit aggression through cyberbullying. Students use social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter to ostracize and spread rumors about classmates, resulting in confrontations and violence in schools (Kolwaski & Limber, 2007; Stover, 2006). Studies

have shown (Hazler et al., 2001) that adults often struggle to identify RA because of its covert, discreet, and nonphysical nature. This poses a problem because the issues continue to occur, and no effective intervening measures are put into place because the aggression has not been properly identified or addressed (Singletary & Johnson, 2020).

Currently, the limited research that supports school counselors' responses to the issue of RA appears to be a major contributing factor in why the topic of RA still seems to be a problem. If school counselors are not able to properly identify the role they play in combating RA, the phenomenon is likely to continue. It is often school counseling professionals who are left to address these covertly mean and aggressive behaviors. Working with students about RA can often be very time consuming and lead to further feelings of hurt and frustration (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). While school counselors can engage directly with students in this process to help them learn how to establish healthy relationships and communication skills, the issue of RA continues to exist (Ebrahim et al., 2012). Little is known about how school counselors personally perceive their roles regarding addressing bullying and RA. School counselors seemingly need clearer direction on how to recognize RA, how to get others in the school to recognize RA, and how to more effectively encourage students to participate in more prosocial behavior instead of the now common culture of exclusion, degrading, and socially alienating peers who do not meet their personal standards (Beasley, 2019; Nordahl et al., 2013). Research suggests that school counselors are most effective in combating bullying and aggression when they enforce preventive programs focused on those topics (Beasley, 2019). However, there are not always clear guidelines or expectations on implementing

such programs (Beasley, 2019). Therefore, RA continues to occur at exponential rates, causing poor school relationships, poor grades, self-esteem issues, and being a catalyst in the reasons young people are using self-harming measures (Espelage et al., 2018). School counselors' own personal experiences with RA, either as victims or perpetrators, has an impact on the way they respond to students who engage in the behavior (Espelage et al., 2018).

I contributed to the current body of research with my study by developing an examination of school counselors' lived experiences RA. The targeted risk factors in this study were school counselors' beliefs and responses relating to their students' use of RA as well as their own subjective experiences with RA and how this may affect their response to this ongoing problem. Significant gaps exist in the literature regarding school counselors' perceptions on addressing relationally aggressive behaviors in African American girls (Belgrave et al., 2011; Waasdorp et al., 2013). This continues to be an issue because although much research supports the notion of Caucasian females engaging in RA, African American girls receive disciplinary action for RA at higher rates than their White female counterparts and are often viewed as being defiant and disrespectful (Rivera-Maestre, 2014; Waasdorp et al., 2013). Further, there are social factors associated with the way African American girls respond to RA that have not been previously explored. An in-depth exploration of this population could help readers better understand how to help African American girls respond in more prosocial ways to RA (see Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Waasdorp et al., 2013). Although this topic has been investigated previously, it has never been explored in this way.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic social-learning phenomenology was to illuminate the lived experiences of school counselors collaborating with African American girls who have encountered relationally aggressive behaviors. The linkage between RA and possible ecological and developmental factors was addressed throughout this study. The focal point of this study was centered on the lived experiences of school counselors specifically as they related to Black girls' use of RA.

Although there has been extensive research on the topic of bullying and aggression, there still tends to be inconsistencies with the perceived roles of school counselors in addressing this phenomenon. My goal was to use the information derived from this study to assist those in the counseling profession to be more initiative taking in understanding their roles as it pertains to addressing RA.

Research Question

What are school counselors' lived experiences of working with adolescent African American females who experience RA?

Assumptions

Some assumptions of this study were that research participants have knowledge of a form of bullying referred to as RA. I further assumed that these school counselors understand the bearing RA had on the girls' daily living and self-esteem. I also assumed that the participants in this study were genuine and honest in sharing their experiences and opinions regarding bullying and RA.

Limitations

The most significant limitation of this study was the sample size. Because this study was isolated to the use of phenomenological hermeneutics, the potential numbers of participants included were small. Small sample sizes tend to limit whether the data outcomes will be relevant to greater population (Boddy, 2016). The use of self-reporting was also a potential limitation of this study due to the possibility of distorted responses and improper recall of details.

Definition of Terms

Bullying: The repeated, unwanted, intentional behavior (physical, emotional, social) of an individual or group of individuals toward another individual or group of lesser strength (physical, psychological, or social; Olweus, 1993).

Dasein: The experience of being there (Peoples, 2020, pp. 34).

Direct Aggression: Hostile or violent behavior toward another person, including physical and verbal readiness to attack or confront (Valles & Knuton, 2008). This form of aggression was viewed as being more prevalent among males as displayed by acts known as rough housing or horse play.

Educators: The adult school employees who have the authority to intervene in bullying situations, typically teachers, administrators, counselors, paraprofessionals.

Hermeneutic Circle: The idea that our understanding of a text as a whole is based on our understanding of each individual part, as well as our understanding of how each individual part refers to the whole text (Peoples, 2020, pp. 34).

Indirect Aggression: A more indirect form of aggression as behavior in which the perpetrator tries to cause harm in a manner that seems as if they had no intent to cause harm at all (Valles & Knuton, 2008).

Overt Aggression: Inflicting pain or harm through physical action such as hitting, kicking, punching, spitting, or through use of verbal abuse such as shouting profanities and insults toward another individual.

Parental response to aggression: The manner in which parents react to their child's aggressive behaviors.

Prosocial Behavior: Using positive communication and interactions such as calmly expressing feelings, sharing, or including others in social activities in order to solve problems (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Relational Aggression: The verbal, social, or emotional exclusion or isolation from friendship or group activities, exhibited in children as young as preschool age, commonly associated with females (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Significance of Study

Introduced by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), RA (RA) is a fairly recent phenomena that addresses the covert form of bullying and aggression that often goes undetected and overlooked by adults. This form of covert aggression has affected individuals in many areas and characteristics have been displayed in children as young as preschool age. With the increase of social networking for the younger generation and the increase in school violence, there is a great need to combat issues of RA. The long-term effects of RA have been linked to depression, social isolation, and substance abuse (Konishi & Hymel,

2009). With the lack of detection this covert form of abuse has gone undetected for so long that it has caused social damage to many children. Both males and females are affected by the use of RA (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005), but research has shown that the effects of RA impact females differently than males (Merrill et al., 2006) typically causing more depressive behaviors, anxiety, and lower self-esteem in females (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). RA was also found to lead to increased physical aggression and marijuana use among girls (Sullivan et al., 2006), as well as more oppositional defiance and conduct disorders (Prinstein et al., 2001, as cited in Yoon et al., 2004, p. 307).

Studies show that RA often goes undetected by teachers and other adults because it is not viewed as physical or violent in nature. There needs to be a more comprehensive understanding of how RA is viewed among the adult population. The current study contributed to the body of literature by revealing common themes among school counselors' lived experiences of RA. Until school counselors form a greater understanding of RA, there will continue to be problems in combating this now rampant problem.

The present qualitative hermeneutic social-learning phenomenological study contributed to the body of knowledge by assessing the views of school counselors' lived experiences as they connect to RA. While the current study complements other bodies of literature surrounding RA, I delved deeper into themes surrounding the perceptions of school counselors using a phenomenological approach with qualitative interviews. Qualitative studies on this topic are needed to gain more insight into how RA should be

addressed (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010). Theoretical constructs of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, Bandura's, social learning theory, and Baker-Miller's relational cultural theory were used in this study. More information regarding these theories is discussed in Chapter 2.

I sought to discover common themes among the lived experiences of school counselors and provide insight on how to better equip children with coping strategies to manage RA. It is the responsibility of school counselors to teach and provide children with the appropriate coping strategies for RA instead of simply taking charge or failing to address that there is a problem (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010). Addressing these factors contributes to helping to close the gaps in current literature and provide insight into school counselors on how to effectively cope with RA (Gomes, 2011). This study contributed to the body of knowledge on the topic and provide a guiding tool to help create more prevention programs in schools and communities to combat RA (see Waasdorp et al., 2011).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In 2019, one out of every five students reported being bullied in school and 41 % of those students reported that they feared the bullying would occur again (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Patchin and Hinduja (2020) revealed that one in five tweens (9- to 12-year-olds) have reported being cyberbullied or witnessed the occurrence of cyberbullying. Of the sample of tweens from Patchin and Hinduja, 49.8% of them shared that they also experienced bullying at school. Over the years, aggression has grown into a multifaceted concept that is defined by a combination of function and form. The two commonly identified types of aggression are overt and relational. Overt aggression is defined as the physical and direct aggression that tends to cause harm through physical contact such as hitting, kicking, and verbal assaults (Crick et al., 1997; Perry & Ostrov, 2023). Research has revealed that although bullying was previously thought of as a common experience that takes place in child development, this thought is far from true.

Because aggression and bullying require cognitive, social, and verbal skills (Young et al. & Young, 2012) it often increases in complexity as children develop (Perry & Ostrov, 2023). Bullying and aggression have been seen as early as preschool age. At this age level, aggressive acts may be very noticeable and evidenced by a child simply telling another child that they do not want to play with them or perhaps going over to another student and snatching a toy away. As children mature with age, aggression becomes much more complex and discreet, thus being referred to as RA. Overt aggression tends to be replaced by more covert, relational acts of aggression such as

lying, rumors, and gossip. As the child's cognitive development increases, they become better able to manipulate and strategize to gain what they are trying to achieve by committing these aggressive acts (Perry & Ostrov, 2023; Young et al., 2012).

Bullying and aggression can have detrimental and long-lasting effects. Studies have shown that children who have been victimized are at greater risk for social maladjustment compared to peers who have not experienced being victimized by bullying behaviors (Perry & Ostrov, 2023; Wright et al., 2014). Loneliness, low self-worth, psychological distress, social anxiety, suicide, and poor social relationships are all possible outcomes of encountering aggressive acts of violence (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Heilbron & Prinstein, 2010; Maynard et al., 2016; Moon et al., 2015). Students who are bullied also tend to be more socially withdrawn, rejected by peers, and have a negative attitude towards school, often resulting in poor attendance, poor grades, and eventually dropping out (Juvonen et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2014Young et al., 2012).

Until recent years, most bullying research has taken a vantage point of the more physically aggressive, overt form (Arsenault, 2018; Kowalski et al., 2014). The typical study on bullying portrays males as the primary perpetrators of aggression, physical in nature (Hazler et al., 2001). This assumption previously left people to believe that females do not engage in physical forms of aggression. However, recent years of research have revealed that females also participate in bullying type behaviors, but they are more covert and discreet in nature (James & Owen, 2005).

RA behaviors are also less physical than the more obvious forms of bullying and aggression. The discreet nature of this form of bullying is what makes it so dangerous

because it often goes undetected by school officials, parents, and other authority figures. Furthermore, research suggests that gender plays a vital role in the types of RA that is displayed (Dailey et al., 2015; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2010). Results of the research conducted on the female aggressor shows that the primary catalyst of girls bullying is due to gains in social status and strengthening relationships with others, while destroying social status of their victims (Archer & Coyne, 2005; James & Owen, 2005; Seals & Young, 2003). Girls are thought to be more verbally aggressive than boys because of the rise in popularity and manipulation that can be achieved by its culprits (Wiseman, 2016). Relationships developed early in life help shape how people solve problems and cope with aggression (Skinner & Wellborn, 2019). Behaviors associated with relationally aggressive acts have been found to be associated with behaviors displayed by both family members (Kawabatta et al., 2014; Merrell et al., 2006; Perry, Ostrov, & Murray-Close, 2021). Most bullying research still focuses on males, but current studies show a rise of aggression displayed by females.

It is believed that this rise in RA is due in part to today's technological advances using social media and other electronic methods such as texting. Females can exhibit covert methods of aggression through spreading rumors through texts or on cell phones, threatening and social exclusion or gossip with Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms (Kolwaski & Limber, 2007; Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). These assumptions are supported by recent research findings that reveal another component has been added to the complexity of RA due to social networking and texting (Low et al., 2013; Pronk& Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). Lenhart et al. (2010) further exposed this reality

by reporting that 75% of American teens are using social networking websites in this technology driven age. These findings support the notion that this new age method of social interaction could be a critical factor in the way RA is conducted among students today.

RA is a more subtle, covert form of aggression than the more popular physical aggression. Potential risks of RA can be emotionally and socially damaging to its victims (Kawabata et al., 2014; Merrell et al., 2006) as well as its perpetrators and may be a powerful predictor of future psychological, social, and academic maladjustment (; Jones et al., 2009; Nansel et al., 2001). Perpetrators of RA tend to have a goal of making social gains through manipulation, humiliation, and gossip. It is believed that these aggressors use these tactics to gain popularity among their peers or to damage the reputation of others to make themselves feel more relevant. According to Gomes (2007), it is the way in which girls are expected to behave that leads them to exhibit these mannerisms. For instance, if they are expected to be nice, they will try not to use physical violence but instead express themselves in more covert and non-violent ways such as eye rolling and gossip. These covert acts become a form of coping mechanism for these girls.

Up until recent years, much research has focused on the potential risk of physical aggression due to the more direct, obvious nature of this type of aggression. There are still many unanswered questions about RA due to the research being fairly recent. Prior studies have called for more research on the topic in relation to the social and ecological perspectives of RA as well as its effects on adolescent and preadolescent youth. While there has been a peak in interest in the topic of RA within the past decade there is still a

great need to continue studies as a great deal of questions remain on this topic (Putallaz et al., 2007). Puttallaz et al. (2007) suggested that future research should highlight environmental factors that increase females' risk for aggressive behaviors as well as explore differences that may exist based on ethnicity. The driving force behind the current study is to address the levels of RA exhibited among school-age African American girls focusing on the lived experiences of the professional school counselors who work with this population.

In this chapter, I explored relevant literature on the topic of RA that contributes to the evolution of RA over time, particularly related to how school counselors' personal experience in addressing the phenomena. Beginning with a discussion of the historical context of RA, I examined the development of RA and its significance today. Theoretical constructs were discussed throughout this chapter. An integration of the social and ecological origins of RA through social, environmental, and cultural influences are explored as possible predictors of this covert form of aggression. In the remainder of the chapter, I provided an examination of the predictors of RA in the school setting and the self-perceived roles of school counselors in addressing RA.

Literature Search Strategies

In order to properly examine the lived experiences of school counselors who address RA, an in-depth examination of prior literature in the fields of education, psychology, mental health, and child development were explored. The databases I used to complete this literature review and analysis were Google Scholar, ProQuest, and PsychInfo. Key words included in search terms included *school counseling, RA, social*

aggression, principal-counselor relationship, effects of RA, RA in African American girls, Black female counselors, lived experiences, hermeneutics, and *phenomenology*. The articles reviewed consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles being published between 2013 and 2023. The results of these searches yielded 416 results in the initial search. After focusing specifically on the combined topics of school counselors, lived experiences, and relational/social aggression the article total dwindled to 12 articles specific to the relevant topic of study. There were also articles selected ranging from dates prior to 2013 based on their relevance to the history of the topic of RA. The minimal number of articles further signify the lack of research being completed on this topic in relation to school counselors.

Theoretical Basis

A qualitative hermeneutic social-learning phenomenology was used in this study to explore the lived experiences of school counselors who collaborate with girls who have experienced RA. The use of such a framework allowed for continuous interpretation of the lived experiences of these school counselors through their personal accounts and experiences, thus revealing the phenomenon. Further, to support this from work from a social learning standpoint, strong empirical evidence exists which indicates the influence that social relationships have on the child's social and emotional development. Environmental factors are currently being investigated in connection to RA and young children. Many relationally aggressive behaviors are thought to be learned or experienced through social interactions and observations (Voulgaridou et al., 2023). Environmental factors include those that an individual encounters on a regular basis which include

family, school counselors, teachers, school administrators, peers, and community members (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Johnson & Brookover, 2021; Parker, et al., 2022; Voulgaridou et al., 2023). Furthermore, gaining an understanding of the lived experiences of school counselors can help create space for healthy dialogue and critical conversations with school and district leaders regarding how school counselors are used within their school buildings. According to the American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2020), the goal is for all school counselors to operate within the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program. It is vital that school administrators understand the benefits of such programs and how effective implementation can help combat RA among other adverse factors in schools.

I explored three major theories to better understand relationally aggressive behaviors through social and environmental perspectives: Heidegger's (1962) hermeneutic phenomenology, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, and Baker Miller's (1976) relational cultural theory.

Heidegger's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The use of a hermeneutic methodology lends the ability to unfold distinct personal experiences (Peoples, 2020). In the research quest, there were no hermeneutic phenomenological studies found relating to school counselors' experiences with combatting RA in African American girls. This study contributes to the field of education and school counseling using themes derived from the analysis of data gathered throughout the research study.

Heidegger (1927, 1962) initially worked alongside Husserl in his quest to study hermeneutics. However, Heidegger later branched off and continued his studies which focused on the lived human experience taking a vastly different approach to how lived experiences should be explored. Heidegger's focus was on the concept of *Dasein* which means" the mode of being human or the situated meaning of a human in the world" (Peoples, 2020, p. 32). Heidegger purported that for something to be encountered one must gain understanding from a person's foundational understanding or through history. Hermeneutic phenomenology as a research methodology can uncover the distinctiveness of individuals' experiences in their personal, everyday experiences (Heidegger, 1962).

Heidegger initially (1962) studied under Husserl and later expanded upon Husserl's research on phenomenology, thus developing hermeneutics (Patton & Broward, 2023; Pham, 2022). Hermeneutic research is different from Husserl's viewpoint in the sense that Heidegger believed that it is impossible for individuals to separate their personal experiences. As a result of his belief that interpretation of *fore-sight* leads to deeper understanding of a phenomenon, Heidegger developed the *hermeneutic circle*. In qualitative research, the hermeneutic circle provides a way for the researcher to explore the meaning of one's experiences in relation to the issues associated with the topic as well as to revise that understanding to view the phenomenon. The hermeneutic circle is a recurrent review and analysis between parts of and the entire phenomenon (Peoples, 2020). In essence, the researcher also becomes a part of the phenomenon through the interpretive school of thought. This involvement of the researcher is why preconceived thoughts are unable to be bracketed. This method results in establishing a much deeper

understanding of the lived experiences of the subject as they navigate common barriers that occur (Peoples, 2020).

Phenomenology can be applied to almost any human experience due to the principle of most people's essential experience of the world is developed through meaning (van Manen, 2014). Hermeneutic phenomenological research is used to describe phenomenon as they appear in daily life, both in foresight, in process, and in hindsight. To be properly theorized, understood, explained, or abstracted one must understand and acknowledge that such attempts are uncertain, dependent, and incomprehensive (Adams et al., 2014).

Social Learning Perspective

Children are influenced greatly by their family members but the peer groups in which children regularly associate also influence the way that they behave and interact. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory supports this belief in that theory suggests that behaviors are learned through observation, modeling, and imitation. While often learning and imitating positive behaviors children also learn to use the negative behaviors (relational and physical aggression) that they have observed to obtain the goals that they are trying to achieve (Albert, 2017). Learning through observation can occur at any age and is particularly common in younger children as they tend to mimic or imitate what they see taking place around them. Bandura hypothesized that not only does the environment affect behavior, but behavior also affects one's environment. This notion would suggest that the typically aggressive behaviors children learn and observe from

their family and peers will be placed into their memory banks until they can imitate the behaviors in the future.

The Bobo doll experiment conducted by Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1961), where the use of a plastic Bobo doll was used to assess the relation of aggressive behaviors and observational learning was deemed groundbreaking. The children who participated in this study witnessed adults interacting with the plastic Bobo doll toy. The children witnessed the adults exhibiting aggressive behavior toward the toy. The children were presented with the opportunity to play with the doll. They were periodically interrupted and became visibly irritated by the interruptions. Their interaction with the dolls following the interruption resulted in modeling the same types of behaviors that had been previously modeled by the adults using the doll. The results of this study suggested that children observe and model behaviors that are displayed in their presence. The social learning theory suggests that aggression stems from influence and observational learning, not just mere frustration. Other factors contributing to the use of aggressive behaviors stem from the attitudes of family members, cultural and community beliefs, and the display of aggressive mannerisms in media.

Children learn through imitation and observation and often model the behaviors that are presented before them to obtain their own personal goals (Clegg & Legare, 2016). While this can be seen as a positive aspect, it is also a learning tool for children to see how the effect of aggressive behaviors can assist them in achieving goals. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory is indicative of this in that it is based on the premise that children learn based on behaviors that are modeled, observed, and imitated. Learning the

effects that aggression has on others helps children to build an inventory of methods to implement for future use to gain the goals they are trying to achieve socially. Based on the beliefs of Bandura, there is a reciprocal relationship between behavior and environment; one affects the other.

Peer group aggression is quite common in today's society (Yoon et al., 2004). Children are victimized by one another by means of social advancement, manipulation, or just to gain popularity amongst their peers. While the most obvious force used is physical, the covert nonphysical nature is equally harmful. In fact, elementary aged children who experience RA are at higher risks for future social isolation, substance abuse, and self-inflicting harm. Exclusion, threating, spreading rumors, and peer rejection are ways that students gain control of social situations, often being backed by peers (Yoon et al., 2004). Victims of bullying and aggression are less likely to develop appropriate social skills and often believe their peers are being malicious even when they are not.

Other effects that aggression and bullying can have on victimized children are that they can learn to use those same aggressive actions to improve social status or to get what they want from others (Clegg & Legare, 2016; Yoon et al., 2021). Victims of aggression tend to develop inappropriate social skills and misinterpret innocent peer interaction as being malicious and calculating when it is non-threatening; thus, continuing the cycle of aggression and victimization. Children who cannot function in a traditional peer group also pick up deviant behaviors and begin to associate themselves with others who have

experienced similar rejection. These are the groups of kids who exhibit delinquent behaviors to gain popularity within their peer group.

Relational Cultural Theory

Relational cultural theory (RCT) is a feminist model on human development that was postulated by Jane Baker Miller in 1976. This theory focuses on women's experiences in their natural social environments, attempting to make females feel seen and empowered. Baker Miller felt that for a person to operate as their best self, they had to have healthy and authentic connections in their relationships with others (Davidson, 2018). RCT has been used to address RA and cyberbullying. The foundational concept of this theory is that relationships are the core catalysts of human growth and development as building blocks for wellness. For example, when a relationship is viewed as positive in nature, it results in individuals who feel validated and empowered, with increased feelings of self-worth and compassion for others (Davidson, 2018). However, negative social interactions would lead to feelings of negativity, and discord, resulting in a lack of personal growth (Davidson, 2018). For RCT to be successful, all parties involved must be willing to put forth an effort that will result in growth and positivity. Consequently, those who lack meaningful social connections are often isolated, confused, and have a greater level of uncertainty about themselves. Many of the characteristics discussed in RCT directly align with the way RA works. The relationship drives the connection or lack thereof (Davidson, 2018).

Historical Context

Bullying research began to take place in the early 1970s with Dr. Dan Olweus, who has been considered the pioneer of research on this topic (Olweus, 1978; Olweus, 1995; Olweus et al., 2019). Olweus considered bullying as a psychological issue and conducted studies focusing on the phenomenon of bullying and physical aggression. All of Olweus's research focused on males as aggressors, not considering females as exhibiting any form of aggression. The *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* was developed in 1985 and was a widely accepted method for combating bullying behaviors around the world. This program, however, was created focusing on research that supported that the only exhibitors of physical aggression were male perpetrators. Dr. Olweus's program helped lay the foundation that bullying was a world-wide problem. One major downfall of Olweus's groundbreaking study on bullying was that he was so convinced that girls did not participate in bullying behaviors that they were not included in his studies (Leff & Crick, 2010; Verlaan & Turmel, 2010). Olweus's work did mention the behaviors associated with RA in his work such as harsh words, making faces, and exclusion from groups (Olweus, 1995) but this subject was not heavily focused on. The historical work of Olweus created a misrepresentation of aggressive behaviors that were not found to be exhibited in girls until later research (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick & Nelson, 2002) revealing that girls do display aggressive behaviors.

Even today bullying and aggression continue to be growing topics of concern across the nation. This trend occurs in schools and neighborhoods across the country daily. Research shows that childhood bullying and aggression are predictors of future

violent behaviors that carry over into young adulthood and beyond (Curwen et al., 2011; Olweus et al., 2019). Media tends to publicize the more overt, physical nature of bullying but the more covert, discrete form of bullying coined *RA* (Crick & Gropeter, 1995) has begun to gain more attention in recent years. RA is just as severe as physical bullying, primarily with females, but is often overlooked due to the indirect and hard-to-detect nature of this form of aggression.

For many years aggression was only studied based on the overt physical nature that was often displayed by male aggressors. This is perhaps in part attributable to the more obvious nature of physical aggression and direct bullying. It is easier to witness a student being physically ostracized through hitting, kicking, punching, etc. rather than the more indirect nature of RA that often involves rumors, gossip, and exclusion from peer groups (Werner & Grant, 2009). While researchers continued to examine bullying from a physical standpoint, the rise of the more covert form of bullying known as RA began to surface.

Years of research indicated that boys tend to exhibit higher levels of aggression than girls (Olweus, 1993; Olweus, 1984). Previous research focused on males engaging in physical forms of aggression and assumed that females did not participate in aggressive acts (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Currently, more focus on how females exhibit aggression is beginning to take the surface, targeting the more indirect, social, and relational forms of aggression that identify females as the primary aggressors. Current research has revealed that females do exhibit aggressive behaviors toward others just in a more covert way that is overlooked in many instances (James & Owen, 2005).

However, as more studies continue there are now inconsistencies being shown in the patterns of RA regarding gender differences. Some studies show that girls exhibit more relationally aggressive behaviors than boys while other studies find no significant difference in the sex of the perpetrators of RA (Crick et al., 1999; Crick et al., 2002; Young et al., 2006). In a study by Hawley et al. (2008), it was found that RA was highly exhibited in boys as well as girls in an attempt to gain social dominance over peers. Further research by Pelligrini et al (2007) revealed that preschoolers and adolescents use aggression in strategic manners whether they are boys or girls.

Historically mistaken for typical adolescent behavior, RA can be best defined as behavior that is deliberate and unfriendly, with the intent to cause harm to another person through verbal, social, and emotional control (Merrell et al., 2006; Young et al., 2006; Hammel, 2008). Although not termed *RA* until 1995 (Crick & Grotpeter) this covert form of aggression has been showing up in history for decades, though mostly overlooked due to its discreet nature and society's view that it was just part of the way kids grow up.

The term *RA* was first introduced by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) after realizing that girls display their aggression differently than boys. The researchers defined this form of aggression as causing harm to others through manipulation and damage of peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Since then, studies have continued around RA, the form of bullying and aggression that appears to be more prevalent among females (Arsenault & Foster, 2012). Research has revealed that the long-term effects of RA can be viewed as being just as serious of an issue with students because it is much more discreet and difficult to detect. A research study by Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck (2012),

focused on finding out how peer relationships at school involving RA and peer victimization related to student symptoms of depression and anxiety. The results of this study revealed that adolescents who reported higher symptoms of anxiety and depression also self-reported more relational victimization and viewed their peers as less trustworthy. Adolescents who underreported their own aggression were viewed as being more disliked by their peers. Participants who were liked more by their peers reported less symptoms of anxiety and depression. This study helps support the current research because it could help shed light on how school counselors view the way youth respond to each other socially. It supports the problem because effective prevention and intervention strategies are needed to help school counselors combat the issue of RA.

Relational Aggression Defined

Relational Aggression

As previously mentioned, the term *RA* has been defined as exhibiting behaviors that cause harm through exploitation, injury, or manipulation to peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Young et al., 2006). Another definition of RA states that it is secretive, concealed, and intends to cause direct psychological or emotional harm to make victims feel helpless (Spears et al., 2009). Other characteristics to describe RA are that it involves threatening behaviors to exclude others from social relationships and activities (Crick et al., 1996). All of these descriptions share the same commonality that the primary purpose of RA is to manipulate social relationships in an attempt to damage the reputation of the intended targets. Because females place such high value on popularity and social relationships, they can take these verbal tirades as far as possible to

psychologically damage an individual's self-esteem without ever physically laying a hand on the victim. RA at times can be so isolated and hard to detect, which is one of the reasons that adults often have difficulty seeing that it has taken place.

RA appears to be motivated by the aggressor's need for control and dominance (Herrenkohl et al., 2009). The aggressor gains control of peers and victims through manipulation and other non-physically harmful acts. They often recruit peers to escalate the teasing and taunting tactics to further weaken the victim. This form of aggression can have a detrimental effect on a child's self-esteem (Nansel et al., 2001; Remillard & Lamb, 2005; Taylor, 2008; Casper & Card, 2017). This form of aggression has become increasingly common in recent years, evidencing more prevalence among the female population although it also affects males. Forms of RA may include spreading rumors, exclusion, social isolation, gossiping, eye-rolling, sarcasm, and revealing secrets of friends (Underwood, 2003; Taylor, 2008; Casper & Card, 2017). RA has been used by individuals as young as preschool-age children ranging to adulthood.

The most reported types of RA are betrayal, exclusion, gossip, and rumors/lies (Leff et al., 2001; Underwood, 2003; Taylor, 2008). These forms of covert aggression occur both separately and in combination. The goal of RA is to gain social power over a peer or peer group (Jiménez & Estévez, 2017). The nonviolent nature of these forms of aggression is what often allows them to go undetected but the emotional scars that can be left on the victims can cause severe long-term effects.

In 1995, Crick and Grotpeter introduced a study on the prevalence of RA in the United States. These authors believed that prior research did not properly distinguish RA,

which was commonly displayed in girls, from common types of aggression. The participants in this study consisted of 162 9- to 11-year-old students in a medium-sized Midwestern town. Through the use of the peer nomination instrument the authors were able to explain the differences between overt and covert aggression being exhibited by the students participating in their study (Crick et al., 1996; Crick & Dodge, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 2002). This research tool was used to assess the students' attitudes and perceptions of aggressive behaviors that involved an intent to harm others. The students were interviewed using various scenarios that involved open-ended questioning. The results of this study were intended to provide insight into interventions that should be used to reduce this type of aggression. The study revealed that both boys and girls exhibit aggressive behaviors, but they are displayed in different ways. The results further supported the hypothesis by finding that RA was a unique set of aggression with behaviors found to be more characteristic of girls than boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Development of RA

Although it has been observed in children as young as infancy, RA tends to increase in females during their adolescent years (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Kenny et al., 2005; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). This could be due in part to developmental changes, transitioning to middle school, making a new set of friends, a heightened interest in the opposite sex, and an increased dependence on social relationships and status. Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) projected that females are most vulnerable socially because they place such a greater emphasis on friendships and social relationships, thus resulting in

them implementing more relationally aggressive behaviors during adolescence. A timetable by Dellasega and Nixon (2003) shows the different stages in which social development takes place in girls. Although this table can differ from child to child this is a guiding tool of typical development of socialization in females.

1. **Middle Childhood (Age 6 to 10):** begin to recognize the feelings of others but focus on physical details and appearance such as what a person wears, what they look like, and how they behave.
2. **Later Elementary (Age 9 to 11):** Girls are focused on pleasing others and being viewed as a good person.
3. **Early Adolescence (Age11 to14):** More focus on gaining close relationships with peers and paying less attention to parents.
4. **Late Adolescence (Age 17 to 19):** At this stage girls gain a greater sense of independence and become more self-reliant. They also gain a greater concern for others.

In infancy, infants and toddlers can be seen exhibiting aggression towards one another when getting upset over objects and sometimes using physical force to gain possession of the item. These types of behaviors have been seen to continue into the preschool years when children continue to use aggressive actions to gain their desires. This may involve hitting others to get a toy or throwing tantrums and screaming to gain attention from parents or other adults. It is possible that the reason for the more physical acts of aggression at this stage in a child's development could be due to a lack in verbal communication skills.

However, as children's verbal abilities increase, they gain a greater reliance on relationally aggressive actions rather than physical acts of aggression (Young et al., 2006; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). Research revealed that RA was exhibited in children as young as preschool between the ages of three and five years old (Crick et al., 1997). This study used report measures from teachers and peers. This was found useful because the type of behavior that is exhibited with the use of RA is not always disruptive to regular classroom functions, thus getting overlooked by the teacher if the students do not report the behaviors. During preschool ages, children begin to express themselves more through verbal actions rather than physical to attain an item or goal. The investigators also revealed that girls exhibited more relationally aggressive behaviors than boys and that boys used more physically aggressive actions with their peers (Crick et al., 1997; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). However, when the boys used RA over physical aggression, they were viewed as more popular by their peers. Additionally, it is important to note that when girls were viewed as the perpetrators of relationally aggressive acts their peers reported their popularity, yet they also viewed these girls as being less liked than peers who did not initiate RA.

As children transition into their elementary years, they become more cognizant of the consequences of physical aggression. Their cognitive ability also increases during this stage, and they can produce witty verbal attacks to hurt their peers. During this stage in a child's development there is an increase in rumors, taunting, and exclusion from peer groups because they now understand the effect that these behaviors have on their peers. A study by Hoff et al. (2009) also revealed a correlation between higher popularity and

aggressive behavior during early adolescence. As children move from stages of pre-adolescence to adolescence the use of RA becomes a much more useful tool because it has a greater social effect on its intended targets. For many young adolescents, possessing popularity and well-known groups of friends becomes a guiding focus, especially among females. Other studies support the notion that RA peaks during the middle school years yet declines during the high school years (Patchin & Hinduja, 2017; Swank et al., 2018). The authors used a research sample consisting of 4, 400 middle and high school students to find that bullying behavior increased in middle school but began to decline as students reached high school (Patchin & Hinduja, 2017)

When conducting a study on a group of adolescent girls, Neal (2007), discussed the composition of female peer groupings as being small which allows for more opportunity to gain personal information about the friends within the group. These groups of girls begin to confide in one another, trusting each other with detailed personal accounts of their life. During this stage in a child's development the importance of peer groups tends to increase and the need to find a group of friends to gain cohesiveness becomes equally imperative. This is a time when cliques begin to form, and the importance of social status is the focus of these social groups.

Additionally, a study by Murray-Close et al., (2007) showed that girls tend to spend more time with friends as they get older, thus resulting in increased social situations. The increased amount of time among friends also gives more time for RA to be exhibited. Murray-Close et al. (2007) suggest that the increased time together allows students to gain more personal information about one another resulting in ammunition

that can be used against their peers in future situations. For instance, if friends get upset with each other the knowledge that has been gained can be used to spread rumors about someone that could be damaging to their reputation since we tend to share our most privileged information with the ones, we believe to be our friends.

Gender Differences

Studies show that the aggressive nature of bullying is displayed differently between genders. Males usually exhibit the more physical forms of aggression that result in kicking, punching, hitting, etc. Females typically participate in gossip, spreading rumors, peer exclusion, isolation, stealing friends, etc. (Crick et al., 1999; Crothers et al., 2005; Seals & Young, 2003). Although evidence shows that girls tend to use more relationally aggressive types of behaviors, boys can also be adept in using RA and suffer consequences related to this type of aggression (Leadbeater, 2010; Swank et al., 2018).

Boys and girls both have different social motives for displaying relationally aggressive behaviors. The motivation for males tends to be to emasculate other boys by creating a punishment that would make the victim feel vulnerable and suppressed (Feder et al., 2010). The catalyst for girls is to be the center of social attention to gain friendships and social alliances. Although boys have been found to participate in RA, studies typically show that males tend to exhibit more direct and physical forms of bullying behaviors than females (Wang et al., 2009). However, when looking at bullying behaviors from a female perspective it is presumed that the more underhanded form of aggression referred to as RA tends to take place. These behaviors are evidenced by spreading rumors, excluding others socially, and giving funny looks. These assumptions

support Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) study involving 491 third through sixth-grade students which revealed that boys primarily exhibited physically aggressive behaviors and girls exhibited relationally aggressive behaviors. The study showed that while both boys and girls were bullied at the same rates the methods used were different. The study further revealed that there seems to be a direct correlation between RA and peer rejections, social isolation, depression, loneliness, and negative self-perceptions in females who were directly involved with RA.

Social status becomes increasingly important as girls get older. However, there can be a decline in popularity and social status due to disruptions in friendships caused by RA (James et al., 2010; Fite & Pedersen, 2018). The slightest form of gossip or rumor can cause a girl's reputation to be tarnished or her social status to decline (Yoon et al., 2004; Swank et al., 2018), which in turn leads to difficulty in forming future peer relationships. According to Letendre (2007), RA is more expressive, and females tend to fight with peers who they have close relationships with. If aggression forms between good friends, then the effect is likely to be more serious (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). However, the authors also found that in instances when these acts occur between close friends, the relationship is more easily mended, and the friends are able to continue their relationship. The results of the Remillard and Lamb (2005) lead one to conclude that when RA occurs among friends, the bonds become stronger, and the girls are able to develop coping mechanisms to better cope with relationally aggressive measures.

Another study by Crick et al. (1996) supported Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) hypothesis by showing that both boys and girls exhibit RA in response to anger; however,

girls expressed relationally aggressive behaviors in a more subtle way. The study conducted by Crick et al. (1996) involved a total of 459 elementary school students attending schools in a town located in the Midwest United States. The ages of the children ranged from 9 to 12 years old. The students were asked to express their beliefs about whether they believed aggressive behaviors were linked with anger, using an open-ended series of questions. The effect of RA on girls can be as equally damaging in an emotional sense as physical aggression is in a physical sense. In other words, although physical aggression can sometimes leave physical scars, RA can result in lasting emotional trauma for its victims.

Additionally, Rys and Bear (1997) formed a study like the 1995 Crick and Grotpeter investigation that also evidenced boys to be more overtly aggressive and girls exhibited the more clandestine forms of aggression. However, the results of this study reported that there were no differences among sex in relation to RA. This study supports the notion that both males and females exhibit bullying behaviors. Regardless of the results it is safe to conclude that RA is viewed as a problem by all and can have damaging effects on those who are involved. All of the aforementioned studies revealed that children view relationally manipulative behaviors as being aggressive. Further evidence revealed that the issue of RA was relatable to both girls and boys. The results on the way boys and girls viewed aggression in boys were similar but when viewing the results of perceptions of aggression involving girls, the two genders were not in agreement (Rys et al., 1997). Girls viewed aggression as being a problem and boys did not. This could be due in part to the clandestine way RA is exhibited in girls. The

children were in agreement that RA is cruel and destructive, leading to further research to assess the effect that RA has on both its victims and its aggressors.

David and Kistner (2000) conducted a study involving 859 children in grades third through fifth located in Northern Florida. The participants were from both urban and suburban areas of the city. The racial make-up of those participating in the study consisted of 69% Caucasian students and 31 % African American students. Using the peer nomination form created by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), the investigation revealed that males received lower peer ratings than females and were found to be both more relationally and physically aggressive than their female counterparts. Results further revealed that African American students were overall viewed as being more physically and relationally aggressive than their Caucasian peers.

Ultimately, studies show that relationally aggressive behaviors eventually begin to decline as children get older, with the peak years of aggressive behaviors being shown during adolescence (Kenny et al., 2005; Dellasega and Nixon, 2003). Many reasons can be the cause of this decline. Typically, there are programs implemented in schools that promote bullying prevention and intervention. Character education programs and small group counseling are just a couple of options for bullying prevention that are offered in schools. Other reasons could be due to the typical victims learning to protect themselves more as they become older (Hanish, 2000). However, the decline in these types of behaviors could be different between male and female students due in part to female students placing more importance on social relationships than males (Coyne et al., 2019). A previous study found that males in first through sixth grades showed less acts of RA in

upper grades, but the results of RA displayed by females increased as their grade level increased (Henington et al., 1998). This research further revealed that females report relationally aggressive behaviors as a norm amongst their peer group.

The 2009 study by Waasdorp and Bradshaw examined whether children and their parents perceived RA in similar manners. In this study a total of 54 children, primarily African American, and their caregivers participated. All participants were asked similar questions in regard to their contact with RA and their perceptions on the severity of RA. The results showed inconsistent results among the girl and boy participants. Girls were found to report similar views of RA as their parents while boys were found to view RA as less severe than the parents.

The variation in results of these studies could be due to the racial composition of participants as well as the populations in which the studies were conducted. For instance, in the David and Kistner (2007) study only 31% of the students were African American which could be an indication of why they were viewed in a less favorable manner than the Caucasian students, which leads one to question the generalizability of the results of this particular study. Other conflicting findings of the research investigations are that males and females are both affected by RA. Traditionally viewed as a form of aggression typical to effect females, research has revealed that males are also victims of RA. Mitigating factors for the act of RA may include the way parents and teachers respond to relationally aggressive behaviors. These factors should be taken into consideration when determining the differences in the perpetration and victimization of RA.

Putallaz et al. (2007) conducted a study on overt and RA in the school setting. The participants in the study included school officials and students. The results of the study revealed that both the Caucasian and Black females exhibited higher tendencies for usage of RA than physical aggression. Although it was reported that boys expressed higher levels of overt aggression, the results revealed that there were no gender differences among the use of RA. It was further found that teachers viewed victims of overt aggression as having lower academic performance, less friends, and expressed more characteristics of shyness and fear. This same group of students was viewed by their peers as being shy and sad and having poor peer relationships. It was also reported that the victims of RA suffered great relational harm as evidenced by the damage caused by social relationships.

RA and African American Girls

Much of the research surrounding RA has been focused on middle class Caucasian adolescent females (Waasdorp et al., 2013). However, African American (AA) girls experience RA as well and are vastly understudied in relation to their white counterparts (Rivera-Maestre, 2015). The problem is many times when African American girls display RA, it is viewed as disrespectful, unfeminine, and delinquent behavior which often results in unequal treatment and consequences related to RA in comparison to their Caucasian female peers (Gregory &Thompson, 2010; Monahan et al., 2014).

Because of the gross underrepresentation of African American girls in researching RA, this study is vital to help school counselors as well as other school officials to be able to better connect to girls of color and learn to consider how sociocultural factors play

a role in how Black girls respond to RA. Research by Belgrave et al., 2011 and later by Waasdorp et al., 2013 suggests that African American girls' behaviors may in fact be a coping mechanism as opposed to the disrespect that school officials often perceive it as being. Research by Henderson (2014) revealed that 12% of African American girls nationwide have received at least one in school suspension (ISS) as opposed to Caucasian girls receiving ISS at a rate of 2% nationwide. This research further revealed that African American girls outnumber Caucasian girls in ISS in all fifty states.

A study by Singletary and Johnson (2020) explored the correlation between suicidality in African American children and RA, particularly the lack of understanding of cultural differences. The results of this study revealed that there is a dire need to educate school employees and parents about the differences between bullying and RA and how to respond to African American females in a culturally appropriate way when AA females exhibit these maladaptive behaviors. The results of this study provide insight that there is a need to understand the differences between traditional physical bullying and the more covert RA. It has been previously assumed that most individuals know what to look for when dealing with RA. Further, Swank et al. (2018) conducted a study that examined how school counselors believed they should address bullying occurrences in their schools. The study also examined bullying prevention programs, bullying laws, and other school factors. The results of the study found that the way school counselors perceived their roles in addressing bullying conflicted with how most of the participants felt their principals perceived their roles in addressing these aggressive and harmful behaviors. The results of this study shed light on the reasons counselors react to bullying

behaviors if the culture of the school environment promotes a more intervening approach as opposed to preventative measures.

Due to the lack of training related directly to addressing RA with AA girls, many school counselors find themselves underprepared and culturally incompetent when working with this population of students (Belgrave et al., 2011). It will be vital for school counselors to receive the appropriate training when collaborating with African American girls due to the current incompetence and lack of understanding for the motivation behind the use of RA in AA girls (Belgrave et al., 2011).

ASCA/ACA Position on RA

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the American Counselor Association (ACA) are two governing bodies that counselors use to abide by their standards and guidelines to ensure that they are both remaining ethical in nature as well as implementing comprehensive school counseling programs. In fact, school counselors have a professional and ethical responsibility to function as social change agents and social justice advocates, as well as to be multiculturally aware, skilled, and knowledgeable in order to be viewed as an effective and culturally competent counselor (ASCA 2014; ACA 2014).

The role of the school counselor requires them to engage with students, teachers, and administrators to promote a school climate and culture that embraces diversity and acceptance while helping to promote the academic, career, and social emotional needs of students. This includes addressing issues such as bullying and aggression. Research states that school counselors have an ethical obligation to prevent bullying of any kind (Remley

& Herlihy, 2014). This notion is supported by ASCA, who states specifically in their preamble which states students should be provided with "a physically and emotionally safe, inclusive and healthy school environment, both in-person and through digital platforms, free from abuse, bullying, harassment, discrimination and any other forms of violence" (ASCA, 2020). Because all students have the right to feel safe in schools, it is the ethical responsibility of school counselors who are at the forefront of advocating for schoolwide policies and protocols related to bullying and harassment in schools. The ACA Code of Ethics further supports this notion by stating that counselors should be advocating for social change at various levels to help "improve the quality of life for individuals and groups to remove potential barriers to the access of appropriate services being offered" (ACA, 2014).

School Counselors' Role in RA

School counselors serve in a capacity that promotes overall student success. Not only do school counselors address the academic and career development of students, but they also address the social and emotional aspects of a student's development as well. School counselors are cognizant in the importance of social emotional development and recognize that social emotional development is vital and works interchangeably with academic and career development. The American School Counselor Association describes professional school counselors as experts in social emotional development; suggesting that school counseling programs are designed to help students enhance this development as well as develop mindsets and behaviors that will help them be successful in their area of functioning (ASCA, 2023).

School counselors foster the social emotional development of students in a variety of ways. Group counseling, classroom guidance lessons, and collaboration with teachers and parents are some of the main ways school counselors address the mental health needs of students to promote prosocial behavior. School counselors are the individuals inside the school building who provide interventions related to enhancing social skills and social emotional learning (SEL). School counselors also conduct classroom guidance lessons and character education that focuses on SEL. Research shows that students who have access to SEL programs have been shown to have more favorable outcomes than those who have not been exposed to SEL (Durlak et al., 2011). These students also tend to be more engaged and have more positive relationships with their teachers and other adults within the school (Cipriano et al., 2023). School counselors also serve in a capacity that allows them to connect and collaborate with all stakeholders. This level of connectedness places school counselors in a key position to provide support in the area of SEL as well as providing a platform to stress the importance of the various stakeholders they encounter. However, due to role ambiguity, it is sometimes difficult for school counselors to adequately serve in their roles, although research continues to show an elevated level of need for support from school counselors in the area of social emotional development.

Social Influences

RA often has an effect on more than just the students involved. The peers, teachers, and parents of students of victims and perpetrators of bullying often encourage or discourage these behaviors in some way. Commonly thought of as just a part of growing up, relationally aggressive behaviors are oftentimes mistaken and overlooked by

teachers and parents (Vernberg & Biggs, 2010). They are often aware of harassment, manipulation, and discreetly aggressive undertones that take place as combative tools used as forms of RA (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Underwood, 2003) but use faulty judgment in thinking that it is just a part of children growing up. A study by Kawabata et al. (2014) revealed a correlation between the development of RA and experiences of relational victimization. The results of the study showed those who were exposed to RA also reported that they had been victimized by an aggressor. It is important to examine the responsiveness of school counselors to understand their role on the effect of RA in children and adolescents.

Parent Perceptions

Bandura's *Social Learning* Theory posits the notion that one of the most influential learning situations for a child begins in the home with the family. Parents provide the foundation for influencing the values and social behaviors children exhibit (Bandura, 1977; Waasdorp and Bradshaw, 2009). The behavior and actions of parents are crucial to the development of behaviors exhibited by children. Children base future behaviors off of those being modeled in their presence and the younger years are typically the most significant in shaping future behaviors. For example, if a child witnesses their parent using forceful or ignoring actions in order to produce a certain result that child will likely store this in their memory bank for future use against peers in order to achieve a certain goal (Yoon et al., 2004). This notion leads one to concur that parents do in fact play a critical role in children's development. In fact, it has been suggested that the way in which parents define and respond to bullying and RA affect

whether or not their child will report being victimized (Sawyer et al., 2011). The Sawyer study (2011) further revealed that parents felt that physical aggression was the most severe type of bullying. These results are thought to greatly affect the unlikeliness of girls reporting this form of abuse to adults because they feel that relationally aggressive acts may not be perceived as severe by the adults to whom they are reporting to. The behaviors and punishment that children are exposed to are usually what they typically display towards others. They learn through observing what is modeled by their parents' interactions with others and the success that is achieved through the use of physically or relationally aggressive behaviors (Nelson et al., 2006). This also expands into situations that occur within the home as well. For instance, parents will respond differently to appropriate and inappropriate behaviors displayed by their children. Appropriate behaviors usually warrant a positive response while less than favorable actions usually result in negative reactions. These actions teach children ways to behave within the home, but they further teach them how to control or influence the actions of others.

Parents also affect a child's response to RA based on the way they react to the child when presented with the problem (Sawyer et al., 2011). Waasdorp and Bradshaw (2009) found that adults do not always view relationally aggressive behaviors as harmful to their children but instead as a part of the child's development and stages of growing up. They often think that these behaviors will just cease as time goes on without adults having to intervene (Bradshaw et al., 2007). This provides evidence that the severity of the effect of RA has on children may not be fully understood and this dilemma can lead to future psychological and emotional maladjustments (Card et al., 2008; Yoon et al.,

2004). Children's perceptions of aggressive behaviors are greatly influenced by the manner in which parents empathize and intercede when they learn that the child has experienced RA (Werner et al., 2006).

Werner and Grant (2009) hypothesized that the perceptions that mothers have to RA greatly influence the reactions of their offspring to relationally aggressive behaviors. The authors surveyed 103 mothers and their children asking the mothers questions about their views on RA with hypothetical scenarios. The results of this study revealed that mothers had a tendency of holding their children less responsible for displaying covertly aggressive types of behaviors and more responsible for their more overt and physical aggression. Many of these mothers reported that they are less likely to show strong disapproval of their children for using RA on others. Further findings of this study were that the mothers who showed a stronger disapproval of the idea of RA had daughters who were more liked by their peers. In correlation with the Werner and Grant (2009) study, an investigation by Mishna et al. (2006) revealed incongruities between children's and parents' perceptions of RA. The adults that responded in a way as to minimize the children's experiences of RA tended to perceive these behaviors as normal and felt there was no need to intervene. If there is a lack of warmth and support from the parents when a child reports these aggressive types of behaviors the child is likely to withdraw from reporting when they have experienced rumors, teasing, and taunting.

Peer Perceptions

Although family affects the development of children in a great way, their peers also serve as models for their future social development. Often learning through

observation, children are able to mimic the actions of their peers in order to achieve certain social goals (Bandura, 1977). While these experiences can be positive learning experiences they can sometimes result in negative actions when observing such behaviors as manipulation and intimidation to achieve goals. This is evidenced by the way children use manipulation and aggression within their peer groups to accomplish such things as increased popularity or other social reasons (Yoon et al., 2004; Kuppens et al., 2008). Research shows that higher levels of popularity combined with lower peer preference were intricately linked to increased levels of aggression (Walcott et al., 2008). These results suggest that although children can manipulate certain peer relationships to gain social status they are still viewed as less than favorable by the victimized peers.

Research has suggested that children use RA as a way to enhance their social relationships. These actions can cause damaging effects for both the victims and aggressors of relationally aggressive behaviors. RA has been found to be of social benefit to its provokers. Children who exhibit RA have been found to be more favorable among their peer groups (Card et al., 2005). A research study conducted by Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck (2010), found that the explanations students used for creating acts of RA fell within two main categories: alleviating boredom and gaining friendship or social status among the peer group. The most common characteristics found for participation in RA were social dominance and the quest for popularity among peers. The participants in the study reported gaining more power over their peers due to the use of their domineering behaviors. In fact, most participants in this study indicated that relationally aggressive behaviors assisted them in climbing social ladders. The authors suggested that the usage

of RA to gain dominance in social relationships can have damaging effects on both the victims and the aggressors.

Other research by Hoff et al. (2009), found that RA in both boys and girls had a direct correlation to gaining higher status in peer groups. Children tend to use these covertly aggressive actions to gain social control over others by participating in gossip and rumors, peer rejection, and social exclusion. Other peers tend to join in on these behaviors making them difficult to stop. The covert nature of the aggressor's behavior results in feelings of betrayal and isolation for the victims but the aggressors usually experienced heightened popularity and social status among their peer group. The effects of these types of behaviors can sometimes lead to the victims of aggression turning to delinquent behaviors with others who have been made social outcasts by their peer group.

School Counselor Perceptions

School counselors are a crucial element in the way RA is addressed at the school level. The perceptions of the school counselor can have a powerful effect on the decisions that are made within the school climate and culture, including how teachers recognize and respond to RA in their classrooms (Goodman-Scott, 2018). School counselors have a considerable amount of daily contact with students in the school setting and are often the ones who would encounter these discreetly displayed undertones of RA. The manner in which a school counselor responds to these types of situations can greatly affect the RA that is addressed and displayed in the future. School counselor responses will also provide yet another model for how a student may respond to RA.

Many factors contribute to RA in children with one key factor being lack of awareness. Bullying behaviors are usually more easily identifiable and combated in the more physical form that is displayed. However, the rise of the more covert form that includes gossip, peer exclusion, and manipulation has shed light on a problem that exists in schools across the country and oftentimes goes undetected by adults (Yoon et al., 2004).

A study by Nordahl et al. (2013) reported that school counselors are often viewed as leadership and student support service providers within the school setting. The authors further suggested that because counselors are viewed in this capacity, they are great catalysts for the implementation and influence of strategies to combat RA. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the role of the professional school counselor is to be social justice advocates and social change agents who aid in removing barriers that inhibit student growth and academic achievement (ASCA, 2012). The focus on the modern-day school counselor is to promote academic, career, and social emotional success for all students. School counselors should work from both preventative and responsive approaches to promote student success.

However, the way school counselors are utilized within a school system or school building is often determined by the principal of the school. This has left many counselors confused regarding their role in addressing certain topics such as RA. Even with extensive training to combat RA, school counselors still face many barriers that inhibit the effectiveness of carrying out their roles. For instance, non-counseling related duties, overinflated student to school counselor ratios, lack of support from administration and

staff, time provided to work with students, resource availability, and space availability can inhibit the success of the school counselor's role in battling RA in schools (Ebrahim et al., 2012).

Means of RA

Technology plays a significant role in the lives of individuals today. The increased use and need for technology has increased cyber bullying, the technological use of the internet that provides children with a new way to exhibit social cruelty towards others (Kowalski et al., 2008; Mason, 2008). With the current use of advanced technology in many homes and most schools, RA is ever changing (Chamberlin, 2006). The usage of text messaging and social networks like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook has provided children with another outlet to display their disapproving feelings for others. The use of this media provides students with an outlet to send out threats, rumors, and exclusion to pester and tease their peers.

Media exposure and technological advances have also changed the way in which bullying and other acts of aggression are exhibited. An increase in technology and the use of social networks has provided other avenues to exhibit aggression through cyberbullying. The humorous spin that is placed on many television shows and movies also make it seem as if the catty and condescending nature of RA is acceptable. Students use social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter to ostracize and spread rumors about classmates, resulting in confrontations and violence in schools (Kolwaski & Limber, 2007; Stover, 2006).

Studies show that over 80% of adolescents own at least one form of media devices (i.e. cell phones, tablets, laptop), and this technology is frequently used to text, email, blog, and access social networking sites (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). Although there are filters put in place to help keep children from participating in these aggressive acts in schools, children are still finding ways to taunt and tease their peers. Although much of the aggression takes place at school, these electronic tools have now provided children with another outlet to harass their peers on weekends (Mason, 2008). Some children have even gone to the extent of creating fake profiles to embarrass others or manipulate their classmates.

Cyberbullying can take place both at home and at school and the effects can be lasting. Cyber bullying becomes difficult to deal with in schools because children are not always forthcoming to share that they have been harassed online or via cell phone. These behaviors, however, negatively affect the child's progress at home and school and its effects can lead to difficulty in academic performance, social competencies, and life at home for both the victims and perpetrators of this type of RA (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). Research by Williams et al. (2010) found that the effects of cyber bullying have a high correlation to suicidal ideations and attempts.

Modern technology has increased the ways in which people can communicate. Everything a child wants to see or hear is just one click away and can be viewed in the privacy of their own rooms or as they walk to school, leaving room for little to no supervision from their parents. These new means of technology also open avenues for children to be away from adults and communicate with a wider range of peers to share

any content they would like. This new means of privacy allows bullies to remain anonymous and cause a great deal of psychological harm to their targets. In many cases it is hard to trace who is behind the spread of rumors on the world wide web because the aggressors could be sending their cruel messages from anywhere. The new age also poses a feeling of vulnerability and isolation for victims of cyberbullying. This new age of technology and social media usage also allows for bullying and aggression to be extended past school hours using the internet (Mason, 2008). The teasing, taunting, and gossiping behaviors are now displayed through cyber bullying on the internet. Some children have created posts, tweets, and blogs dedicated to the embarrassment and humiliation of their peers (Mason, 2008). Students use the internet to badger and manipulate peers because of limited monitoring by parents and other adults. Currently 52% of students reported that they experience bullying online and only 52% report that they shared their experience with their parents or another responsible adult (Robers et al., 2013).

Media violence can be found in all types of media content including commercials, video games and movies, cartoons, television shoes, etc. (Kirsh, 2012). The effects of exposure to media violence have remained consistent in people of all ages, races, and parts of the world; exposure increases the chances of a greater likelihood for future aggression. A 2006 study conducted by Ostrov et al. investigated the effects of educational media exposure on preschool students. The authors used a sample of 78 students to determine whether or not exposure to certain media had an effect on the use of RA. The findings of this study suggested that this exposure was directly associated with the children's future use of RA. The authors suggested that children were often found to

be not attending to the entire content of the educational media but focusing more on the components surrounding RA. Ostrov et al. (2006) further suggested that the students were only attending to and modeling the portions of the media that expressed the relationally aggressive behaviors. So, while this type of media exposure was thought to be helpful to the students, this study revealed otherwise. Other research has shown that instances of RA are shown at rates as high as 9.23 times per hour in children's television shows (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008).

In 2013, Ostrov, Gentile, and Mullins conducted a longitudinal study investigating the effects of educational media content on social development. This study supported the findings of the Ostrov et al. (2006) study where significant increases in both observed and teacher reported instances of RA were found. The authors also found that there was an increase in parent reporting across the two-year time span of the study. This study further supported prior investigations that found links between educational media exposure and RA.

RA and School

The school setting provides children with time to interact socially with peers throughout the school day and has been viewed as a common place for the existence of aggression. Not only does RA affect the school but the school also affects RA. At school students often tease or gossip about one another regarding the way they look or dress, their lack of understanding academic concepts, or the social circle that they choose to engage with. Research has found that these aggressive actions are often overlooked or ignored by teachers (Yoon et al., 2004) because they see this as typical behavior that

occurs in developing students. Bradshaw et al., (2007), reported that teachers underestimate the prevalence of bullying behaviors although they report witnessing students exhibiting mean or inappropriate behaviors towards one another.

The effect of RA can be felt in school classrooms, hallways, libraries, bathrooms, and cafeterias. A study by Kuppens et al. (2008), found that the classroom environment influenced children's use of RA. In the Kuppens et al. (2008) study, the authors found that the students who used relationally aggressive tactics the most were in classrooms where teachers were either more oblivious to the acts or did not view RA as being a severe problem in their classroom. These authors suggest that if teachers were to limit their tolerance on RA within the class setting this would reduce how often students use RA in schools. These findings support the study of Yoon and colleagues (2004) that showed that teachers are less sympathetic to RA than physical aggression.

RA is known as being more difficult to detect than physical aggression. This inconspicuous form of aggression has been found to occur in the classroom as well as less structured times such as before and after school, transition periods, developmental play, and lunch time. Because of the times that students tend to engage in relationally aggressive behaviors teachers are often oblivious that these actions have taken place. When it occurs within the classroom it is discreet and quiet. Due to the unstructured nature of playground time more relationally aggressive acts are found to occur during this period in the school day. Low et al. (2010) found that children often participate in malicious gossiping behaviors on the playground. Recess time is also a time when children are teased, ignored, and excluded from activities with their peers and can go less

detected due to more freedom to be further away from adults which makes interactions difficult to hear (Craig et al., 2000).

Lunchtime is also a less structured area of the school day. Teacher assistants and lunchroom aides are typically left to monitor students during lunch time. They may not notice the relationally aggressive behaviors that take place, especially in cafeteria settings where multiple classes of students are being monitored at once. This decreases the likelihood of being able to detect RA.

RA is difficult to deal with in schools because it is often difficult to detect these behaviors. School often provides clear guidelines in handling physical aggression but the levels of involvement with RA are often unclear within the school policy. This makes it difficult to discipline these types of aggression at the school level. Relationally aggressive tactics also make for less safe school environments by affecting the school and social climate. The adage that "boys will be boys and girls will be girls" is often the perception that adults and educators have about the relationally aggressive behaviors that children exhibit. They think that children will just eventually outgrow this period, but research has shown that RA tends to escalate as children get older if it is unaddressed and undetected. The results of RA can be lasting on everyone involved in these discreet and malicious acts.

Coping with RA

Parents, community resources, and schools have a direct effect on the overall development of children. It is important for adults to be cognizant of the several ways that children cope with aggressive acts of behavior. It is common to experience some

level of conflict in social relationships. However, when the result of those conflicts is becoming an aggressor or victim of RA the results can be lasting, hence the importance of the need to be equipped with the proper tools in responding to RA. Research suggests that RA may be reduced by teaching assertiveness training to girls (Taylor, 2008). Literature further shows that teaching students to form positive peer relationships can serve as a catalyst to combat RA (Michiels et al., 2008). In Crick et al. study (1996) it was found that children who do not participate in some sort of intervention are likely to remain aggressive over time. In many instances the level of support that a victim feels is the catalyst in how often they report their victimization to others (Remillard and Lamb, 2005). Similarly, Davidson and Demaray (2007) found that support from parents, teachers, and peers can minimize the effects of RA. So, if girls feel supported by their peers, teachers, and/or parents they are believed to be more likely to report relationally aggressive tactics to gain social support. Positive social support is useful for getting victimized children to report incidents of RA (Davidson & Demaray, 2007). The Remillard and Lamb study further purported that girls are allowed to vent and express their frustrations when confronting social issues and this may help save their friendships. The authors further postulated that if girls can express their feelings in this manner, then they will be less likely to resort to RA.

Outcomes of RA

It is common for gossip, isolation, ostracizing, and rumors to cause feelings of sadness, anger, and despair among its targets (Card et al., 2008). Effects of RA often lead to poor self-esteem, depression, social isolation, anxiety, substance abuse, eating

disorders, and school refusal (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick, 2002; Taylor, 2008; Konishi & Hymel, 2009). Adults are either thought to be oblivious to or uncaring of relationally aggressive acts. This covert form of bullying is oftentimes mistaken for typical childhood behavior thus being ignored by adults (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). Not taking RA seriously can greatly affect the future of children. Both males and females are affected by the use of RA (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005), but research has shown that the effects of RA effect females differently than males (Merrill et al., 2006) typically causing more depressive behaviors, anxiety, and lower self-esteem in females (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). RA was also found to lead to increased physical aggression and marijuana use among girls (Sullivan et al., 2006) as well as more oppositional defiance and conduct disorders (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, as cited in Yoon et al., 2004, p. 307).

Psychosocial Effect

The Crick and Grotpeter study (1995) revealed a linkage between RA and psychosocial maladjustments in later years. Other studies have shown that the effect of RA can lead to future social and psychological maladjustments, not limited to feelings of isolation, loneliness, peer rejection, and depression (Godleski & Ostrov, 2013; Crick, 1996; Nansel et al., 2001; Tomada & Schneider, 1997; Crick et al., 2006). A study by Card et al. (2008), found correlations between direct and indirect aggression to internalizing behaviors such as withdrawal, anxiety, and depression. Other research has supported the findings of the Card et al. (2008) study, revealing those outcomes of bullying result in mental health problems such as increased anxiety, depression,

loneliness, low self-confidence, suicidal behavior, delinquency, and problematic behaviors (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Lien et al., 2009).

Research also finds that girls who display relationally aggressive behaviors tend to be more disliked by their peers of the same age and consequently these students also show more adjustment problems and report more loneliness and hopelessness (Bjorkqvist et al., 2001). Further research by Crick et al. (1996) showed that girls who use RA have more of a struggle forming social and interpersonal relationships. The covert nature of RA is what makes it difficult to detect who the actual aggressors are (Brinson 2005).

Research by Carney (2008) also found students who were more exposed to relational and peer aggression had significantly higher levels of trauma. This predictor further supports earlier studies where students report having overall poor feelings about themselves and poor relationships with their classmates (Smith et al., 2004; Nansel et al., 2001). Students involved in relationally aggressive behaviors have been found to have fewer friends than the typical student who is not victimized by relationally aggressive behaviors (Smith et al., 2004). Other research has revealed that children who are involved as either bullying victims or perpetrators have lower self-esteem than students who do not engage in bullying behaviors. The poor relationships and lack of friends resulting from bullying victimization can further isolate these students from engaging in social interactions with peers. These students also were reported to experience depression and loneliness (Godleski & Ostrov, 2013) as well as other social and psychological maladjustments and were more likely to contemplate suicide.

Academic Effect

Aggression and bullying can have a vast effect on a child's ability to progress both academically and socially. Victims of RA often develop avoidance behaviors towards school in attempts to prevent further victimization (Card et al., 2008). Other research has found that students have difficulty concentrating in school and contemplate staying home because of social problems with their peers (Dellasega & Adamschick, 2005). The student's disengagement from academics can have a negative effect on their grades and serious gaps in their learning could take place. This leads to an even more negative relationship with school as these gaps only cause greater difficulty in successfully completing schoolwork. As they continue to get older and even further behind, the effect of RA could further potentially put both victims and perpetrators at risk for academic failure and dropout (Risser, 2013). This could lead to a life of crime, unemployment, and family discord for both victims and aggressors of RA.

A 2008 study by Goldstein, Young, & Boyd revealed that students who are victims of RA tend to feel less safe in school. This could cause students to carry weapons to school if they feel that they need to protect themselves. A study by Baum (2008) supports this premise in its findings that students who experienced peer victimization had more absences from school and some of the victims' carried weapons to school in hopes that their aggressors would leave them alone. Findings such as these only support the importance of addressing relationally aggressive behaviors at the school level.

Not only does relationally aggressive behavior affect the victims, but the perpetrators have also been found to be affected academically as well. In the Nansel et al.

study (2001), it was found that aggressors had poor academic functioning as well. The investigation also linked the aggressors to other problematic behaviors such as drinking and smoking as well as student aggressors' self-report of making friends easily (Nansel et al., 2001).

Summary

The purpose of this research study is to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of school counselors collaborating with African American girls who have experienced RA. The focus of RA has expanded over the last fifteen years (Ostrov & Crick, 2006). However, there is still very little research on this topic in comparison to the more widely studied topic of physical aggression. Additionally, research is limited regarding personal accounts and experiences of school counselors who are often tasked to address RA in schools. Studies on aggression historically focused on the more physical forms of aggression and violence as opposed to the more indirect and covert forms of RA. It was important to use two popular theoretical constructs to help the readers better understand RA. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology (1962), Bandura's social learning theory (1977), and Baker Miller's relational cultural theory (1976) were used as guiding models in assisting in the explanation of RA.

Environmental and social factors that contribute to RA were discussed throughout this review to further help the reader to understand how family, peers, and community all affect social and emotional development of children and adolescents. Developmental factors of RA were also discussed, providing research that shows differences among gender as well as the effect of relationally aggressive behaviors in school settings. Girls

have been found to be affected by RA in different ways than boys because they place greater emphasis on the development of social relationships and social status among their peer groupings.

Current research is moving to school counselors and other adults with interventions to be used in combating relationally aggressive behaviors (Merrell et al., 2006; Yoon et al., 2004; Young et al., 2006). Research has even shown that parents and educators downplay the severity of RA, thinking that it is just bickering or a phase that all children go through in life. Little research has delved into the relationship between RA and the ecological and developmental constructs of its presence in girls. There are several social and environmental factors that contribute to the development of RA.

Prior research has discussed that RA needs to be taken more seriously by implementing intervention and prevention programs to combat the problem in school settings (Yoon et al., 2004) as well as providing further training for school counselors, teachers and administrators to better detect and address relationally aggressive behaviors (Merrell et al., 2006). RA is one of the most difficult forms of bullying to pinpoint in the educational setting. Adults are often unable to detect every covert action that occurs within the school environment. Making children aware of the prevalence of RA and bullying as well as the consequences of its usage is important. Providing effective coping skills and responses in combating RA can help target and minimize these behaviors in homes and communities. Family and community support when reporting these annoying and emotionally harmful acts can help deter these covertly aggressive acts among children in our communities, more specifically the female populations.

There is still much research left to be completed on the topic of RA. This study tries to contribute to existing research by examining the lived experiences of school counselors on the topic of RA. Very few studies have focused on direct dialogue from school counselors on this topic.

Chapter 3: Research Method

In this chapter I describe the methodological approach I used within this study as well as the rationale for the chosen approach. The chosen approach was based on the guiding questions of the investigation. With this extant hermeneutic social-phenomenological study, I sought to gain insight into the lived experiences of school counselors who work with African American girls who have experienced RA. The use of phenomenology allowed me to gain an in-depth perspective on the lived experiences through observation, description, and interpretation based on preexisting values and knowledge (van Manen, 2016; Ho et al., 2017). The data collected from this study assisted in finding correlations as well as differing views of the participants regarding the topic of RA among African American girls. Further, a description of the role of the researcher includes the chosen population along with research design was discussed in detail. Additionally, a description of the data collection process is discussed along with the desired instrumentation and data analysis. Lastly, in the conclusion of this chapter I discussed the methodological assumptions and ethical considerations.

The following research question was addressed in my study:

RQ: What are school counselors' lived experiences with RA and their ability to provide appropriate coping strategies in combating this form of behavior?

To address the gap in knowledge related to school counselors and RA, I used a hermeneutic social-phenomenological approach in conjunction with a semi-structured interview protocol with practicing school counselors to develop a thorough understanding

of what they experienced during the process of addressing RA within their schools, including any barriers they experienced.

Research Design and Rationale

My objective with this study was to go beyond quantitative descriptions and numerical conclusions to obtain a greater understanding of the experience of RA. A phenomenological approach provided insight into how one experiences RA by exploring the lived experiences of school counselors about RA (see Patton, 2015). As stated by Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck (2010), interviews allow for people who have direct experience with relationally aggressive behaviors to provide insight into why the behaviors take place. My subjective position as the researcher was considered throughout the study. Much of the research surrounding RA tends to take a quantitative research approach (Crick, 1996). I investigated how school counselors perceive RA using direct interviews.

Qualitative methodologies reveal descriptive and naturalistic data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This phenomenological research approach allows the researcher to engage directly with the participants, gaining direct knowledge and insight into the guiding discussion. I also explored school counselors' perceptions of relationally aggressive behaviors among AA girls. Qualitative approaches help enhance the current research in this field by providing a framework for how these school counselors perceived their roles in addressing relationally aggressive behaviors.

Traditionally girls have been marginalized and excluded from research on aggression and bullying (Crick, 1995; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Phenomenological

studies call for a gathering of information and developing common themes or codes from the participant's experience (Patton, 2015). This qualitative research design allowed school counselors to share their accounts and insights about RA and their experiences with African American female students in their own words. Additionally, the semi-structured interview process I used in this study also provided direct insight and understanding of the perceptions of school counselors in the phenomena of RA. The interview process allowed participants to directly express how their experience with RA has influenced them. The information gathered through qualitative methodology complemented the existing body of research that was primarily dominated by information using quantitative research approaches.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight school counselors to determine what are their perceptions of RA among the African American girls they have worked with. The potential number of participants was based on the level of saturation that was reached within the study (see Boddy, 2016). Saturation was achieved when there was no new information being acquired within the interviews from participants and research from Boddy (2016) suggested that a qualitative sample of ten was a sufficient sampling size.

The strengths of using phenomenological studies are that the researcher can discover what the participants are currently experiencing regarding the prevalence of relationally aggressive tactics displayed by students. The key concept in this study was to make sure that all the research participants had knowledge of and had encountered RA and are able to exclude my personal biases and experiences related to the study. The

open-ended format of interview questions allowed me to capture the experiences of the participants and reveal themes that inform the meaning of this experience (see van Manen, 2016). The use of hermeneutics in interviewing school counselors helped lend an understanding of their personal views and beliefs addressing RA in African American girls they have served and interpret the meaning of their experiences.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological study, my overarching goal was to make discoveries, conduct analyses, and share the meaning of each participant's lived experiences. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher is considered the instrument and when viewing the hermeneutic circle, it was vital to examine the essence of what the researcher lends to the study as well (Spence, 2017). Heidegger's framework states that the researcher needs to develop a preunderstanding that may influence their interpretation of each participant's experience (Spence, 2017). One of the first ways to develop preunderstanding was to arrive at how the researcher became interested in the topic to begin with (Peoples, 2020, pp. 33). Being a school counselor who has worked directly with African American girls experiencing RA, I am aware of the literature that currently exists on the topic. I have 14 years of experience as a school counselor working with children at all levels. I am cognizant that my experience in the field led to a confirmation of my current understanding of this phenomenon and my understanding was revised based on what was discovered during the research process.

The continued issues that surface regarding RA throughout the years inspired me to conduct this research. There also tends to be a disconnect between the way RA was

addressed with African American females versus females of other races (Swank et al., 2018). School counselors are often tasked with various duties throughout their respective school buildings. Their job duties vary vastly depending on expectations from school administrators and principals. Participating in the role of a hermeneutic researcher allowed me to use my personal experience and background as a school counselor as well as prior knowledge about RA to influence data collection and analysis.

The Researcher's Experience

Dasein and Foresight/Fore-Conception

The *Dasein* describes the effects of being present in the world during this research process. Heidegger (1968) conceptualized that unique experiences shape a person's view of the world. As a professional school counselor of color, I have a vast array of experience working with students who have experienced RA in some form in both past and present career settings. Because of this, it was important to be self-aware of how the line of questioning and dialogue allowed my personal experiences to surface. During these interviews and research, I made several self-discoveries, which included how my own experiences of working with girls were very similar to some of the participants' experiences. Reflexive journaling allowed me to notate my thoughts and experiences working with girls who experience RA to avoid being biased on the topic. After the interviews, I was able to review the journaling notes to discover the correlations and differences in my experiences versus the experiences of the research participants.

Hermeneutic Circle.

This concept, discussed by both Heidegger (1968) and Gadamer (2008), focused on how a deeper understanding of the phenomenon is developed by engaging with the phenomenon. In the present research, the hermeneutic circle served as a way of shifting between my understanding of RA and the discoveries made within the individual participants' experiences throughout this research. One major pitfall that I incurred in this process was developing what I interpreted as a feeling of being overly connected and relatable when it came to some of the participants' accounts on the topic of RA. Although these participants were still able to share their stories and experiences surrounding this topic, I had to remain cautious about not allowing my feelings to change the trajectory of the messages that the participants were trying to convey. I also had to be aware of differing views that may have been opposite of my views on the topic.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected through their roles as current professional school counselors. The study was conducted in 2024, with eight participants for the study. Participants in the study included a sample of practicing school counseling professionals. Participants for the study were selected based on voluntary interest in participation through expressing an interest and willingness to participate via social media posts made in school counseling related groups on the Facebook platform. Interested participants were also asked to share the flier with other school counselors in the field they felt may have interest.

Of the individuals who expressed a willingness and interest to participate, a purposive snowball sample of eight school counselors was chosen based on their willingness to provide consent. Purposive sampling was used because it helped me determine who was selected as a part of the study (see Daniel, 2016). Because this research focus was hermeneutic, being able to select from a group of school counselors allowed for the opportunity to have participants who could provide deep insight and meaning to the research. Purposive sampling also limits the amount of bias that has the potential to arise during the study, yielding more valid results (Daniel, 2016).

Snowballing allowed for me to reach more potential participants as the purpose of a snowball sample was for the researcher to be able to gain access to participants who may have direct knowledge of the topic of interest (see Parker et al., 2019). A snowball sample was beneficial for this study because having participants have experience with the topic of RA provided new insights and suggestions for future research (Parker et al., 2019). Participants were made aware of the possible benefits and risks associated with being involved in this study. They provided electronic consent before participating in this study.

For school counselors to participate, they acknowledged that they have worked with African American female students who have been involved in RA either as a victim or aggressor. The interviews took place via phone or Zoom, depending on the preference of each participant. Confidentiality and HIPPA compliance were explained to each participant before obtaining their willingness to consent to participation. As a professional school counselor, I am aware that the topic of RA can harbor strong feelings

for all parties involved. I provided information on outside resources and agencies that the participants could use if they needed to contact anyone for further consultation or counseling services.

Instrumentation

Semistructured interviews involving an open-ended line of questioning were used to obtain data for the proposed qualitative study. Follow-up interviews were conducted to address any gaps, gain clarity, or for additional questions that arise. The *School Counselor Demographic Questionnaire* (Appendix A) was used to provide information about the income level, educational level, years of school counseling experience, number and ages of children, and marital status of the participants. The *School Counselor Interview* (Appendix B) consisted of a 15-question list, including questions tailored to issues of RA, current intervening and/or preventative measures, and perceptions of the school counselor's ability to combat RA.

School Counselor Demographic Questionnaire

The school counselors participating in this study provided basic demographic information about their educational level, years of counseling experience, and age. This information was pertinent in providing basic descriptive information as well as linking school counselor experience to addressing RA in students.

Interviews

All interview questions were developed with the intent of seeking information about the participants' experiences with RA. During the initial meeting, an introduction was made. An explanation of the study was provided to the participants before gaining

consent to participate in the study. The participants were reminded that participation in this study was optional, and they could choose to withdraw their participation at any time. The interviews were semi-structured. Participants were emailed interview questions for review prior to the interview. They were then given the option of participating via phone or Zoom. Because phenomenological studies focus on the depth of people's perceptions (Neubauer, 2019; Peoples, 2020, pp. 19), this study was limited to a small number of participants. It was projected that this study would have between three and eight participants. This study resulted in a total of eight participants. Interviews were conducted with participants until saturation was reached. Generally, studies of this nature call for only a small sample of participants (Boddy, 2016).

Procedures

A flier with details related to this study was shared with school counselors who access social media platforms such as Facebook. The information was shared among various groups related to school counseling on the Facebook platform. School counselors who expressed interest completed the Google form linked to the flier. This form gathered the contact information and names of all potential participants. Each interested participant was contacted to determine if they met the qualifications to participate in the study. Those who expressed interest in participating were invited to formally participate once it was determined they had direct knowledge of the research topic. School counselors who have worked with African American females were the focus of this study because research shows that RA is most prevalent among girls and the use of RA continues to

increase as the girls approach adolescence (see Bradshaw et al., 2007; Kenny et al., 2005).

The sample of participants was generated by making an announcement via Facebook groups geared toward school counselors about the stated topic of interest. The announcement outlined the purpose of the study. The risks of participation were outlined with the participants before obtaining consent. All participants received an in-depth explanation of the study and completed an electronic informed consent agreement.

The nature of these interviews consisted of semi-structured open-ended questioning. Five interviews took place via phone while the others took place via Zoom based on the participant's choice which was within reason. The range of time for these interviews lasted roughly 24 minutes to 1 hour. If follow-up questions were needed for clarity or to fill in any gaps related to the initial interview, an additional 15-20 minutes were necessary for follow-up. Participants were thanked for their time after the interview process and allowed time to ask questions. The interview setting was quiet and distraction-free to focus solely on the task at hand. Limits of confidentiality, interview format, as well as potential risks related to participating in this study, were discussed with the participants before beginning the interview. Participants' real names were also omitted from this study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of each participant. I conducted the interviews and obtained consent from the participants to have the interviews taped for later transcription for those who are participating in a face-to-face or video interview. Demographic information was obtained from the subjects via a

Google Form prior to the interview. The demographic information was completed at the time of the consent for participation in the study via the aforementioned Google Form.

Data Processing and Analysis

It was important for the researcher to be clear in understanding the data results from his or her field experience. It was equally important for researchers to properly comprehend the interactions of various themes and patterns that emerge from the collected data. Coding techniques were utilized to help organize and analyze the data collected during this qualitative research investigation. According to Gibbs and Taylor (2005), “coding is the process of combining data for themes, ideas, and categories and then marking similar passages of text with a code label so that they can easily be retrieved at a later stage for further comparison and analysis. Coding took place using reflective journaling so that initial codes could be identified. Using reflective journaling, the researcher was able to identify common themes within the phenomenon.

Reflexivity was used to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the analysis, exploring potential bias that extends from the position of the researcher. Research participants were administered semi-structured interview questions throughout the data collection process. All interview information was transcribed and hand coded.

Illustrated Data Analysis Steps

The data analysis process began to take place before the first encounter with the participants. I began this process by first describing to the participants the nature of the study and gauging their interest in participating. Each participant was informed of my plan to keep anonymity throughout this research as well as to notify them that the

interviews were recorded for later transcription. Before beginning the actual interview process, I engaged the participants in small talk to make them feel comfortable and at ease throughout the interview process. I then began the interview process by letting them know I was about to begin recording and reintroducing myself and explaining to them my role and the purpose of the interview. Participants were given a participant number to keep track of the various interviews that were taking place as I continued research. The participants were then provided with a list of potential questions that were asked throughout the process. However, some of the questions were omitted for some participants and additional questions were added for others based on responses the participants gave. I began by asking the beginning interview question and continued this process until the conclusion of the interview. After the last question and response were provided, I followed up by asking the participants if they had any questions or any information they wished to add to their interview. After the information was gathered, the analysis process began.

To synthesize the data further, Giorgi's (1985) data analysis process was used. This process followed a six-step method that included the following steps:

1. Read the entire transcript and delete unnecessary information and member checking.
2. Establish preliminary meaning units.
3. Finalize meaning units for each interview.
4. Create situated narratives for each interview.
5. Establish general narratives into recurring themes across experiences.

6. Summarize the experience of the population into one general description.
7. Complete the phenomenological reflection.

Step 1: Read Transcript/Delete Irrelevant Information

Step one of the process was to read the entire transcript and delete unnecessary information and member checking. Upon completion and transcription of the interviews, I allowed for time to review the transcript to eliminate irrelevant information throughout. I then reflected on the notes taken from the interviews as well as reviewed audio recordings. Member checking was used throughout the research process to ensure the full understanding of each participant's experience. While reviewing the manuscript I also noted my direct observations within the interview (i.e. participants' tone, facial expressions, and body language).

Step 2: Establish Preliminary Meaning Units

Step two of the process was to create preliminary "meaning units" which break down characteristics derived from the participant interview regarding their lived experience with RA. This step helped me to identify the meaning units as I proceeded to the coding phase of the research. Additionally, within this step, additional questions may arise, making follow-up questions necessary to help fill in gaps.

Step 3: Finalize Meaning Units

Step three identifies the final meaning units or the themes into which the data was broken down. Categorizing the data helped provide a deeper understanding of how each participant's contribution told a story across each of them as well as highlighted the differences in their stories.

Step 4: Create Situated Narratives

Step four involves the situated narratives, in which specific elements of each participant's accounts are reviewed and placed into thematic groupings under specific interview questions. This step also allowed the researcher to focus on themes derived on a more individual level, relying heavily on direct quotes used by participants within the interview.

Step Five: General Narratives

Step five of the process involves producing general narratives of the research. These narratives fuse the common themes of each participant to develop a more general population description. General narratives are created as a result of the situated narratives, categorizing and organizing the narratives from the most to least saturated themes.

Step 6: General Description

Step 6 of the data analysis process was to provide a general description, connecting major phenomenological themes into a more cohesive and general description.

Step 7: Phenomenological Reflection

For the final step, the use of Martin Heidegger's (1968) Hermeneutic Phenomenology was used to provide a phenomenological reflection of this study. In this research, school counselors who work with African American girls encountering RA describe their unique awareness and experiences of this phenomenon as well as how their views contribute to their experience of being-in-the-world and being-with-others.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility is about making the results of research valid and believable (Patton, 2015). It is ethically important that researchers conduct valid studies. One way to achieve this was by staying objective, being aware of personal biases, and reporting all of the findings in the study, both negative and positive. Credibility was reached in the proposed study by providing thorough explanations of the research focus to participants as well as keeping them aware of any changes throughout the process. Member checking was also used to maintain credibility by way of making prolonged engagements with the participants in their environments throughout the research process. Member checking also allowed research participants to review what was transcribed and interpreted from the interview process to ensure that the researcher had properly depicted the message the participant was trying to convey. This contact also included follow-up interviews if additional clarity was needed, or questions arose. Additionally, interviews were recorded for transcription and data analysis purposes.

Transferability

According to Creswell (2013), transferability is all about how well research results can be generalized across various settings and populations. One way to enhance transferability within the current research study was to thoroughly describe the context and assumptions relevant to the research topic. This was achieved through the use of thick descriptions, which Creswell (2013) describes as describing the phenomenon on a deeper level such as attending to the participant's mannerisms and body language as well

as any other significant factors that could lead to more complex interpretations and findings. The small and purposeful sample that was used within this research study calls for a single setting and event. Thoroughly detailed descriptions of the participants' accounts were used to immerse the reader in the findings of the study to help the reader determine if the findings are transferable to their particular situations or settings.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability within qualitative research, much like reliability, was achieved because the current study can be easily duplicated by future researchers. Dependable research studies can be achieved using rich descriptions, quality recordings, and quality transcriptions (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, journaling throughout the data gathering and analysis process allowed for explanations of researcher bias as well as lends to more transparency in what was discovered through the results of the study (Rudenstam & Newton, 2015).

Confirmability is when findings emerge from the data without bias. This was achieved through research interpretations and rich descriptions of emerging themes. Reflexive journaling allowed the researcher to document their personal biases that could influence the research process. This allowed the researcher to ensure that all necessary steps were taken to ensure that a quality and credible study had been conducted. Triangulation was also achieved through external audits and regular feedback from the committee members as data was gathered and analyzed.

Ethical Procedures

Issues related to confidentiality are among the most violated ethical issues. Exposing participant information can put the study at risk of breaching confidentiality. The information I gathered from this research was stored in a password-protected file on my computer. It was also important to explain the procedure of the study and the types of instruments being used as well as how the results of the study were used (ACA, 2014, E.3.a). Because I asked open-ended questions, this allowed for the greatest chance of authenticity in answers from participants. I plan to ensure that the wording and terminology used in the questions are not leading or biased in any way. One of the main considerations I have surrounding this topic was that it could remind participants of their own experiences with RA and could trigger negative feelings or emotions. Another possible consideration was that they could have feelings of guilt due to the way they have addressed or failed to address RA in the past. When working with research participants it was important to discuss the risks associated with participation in the study as well as offering them an informed choice on whether to agree to participate in the research (ACA, 2014, D.2.b).

The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) outlines three different processes through which IRB certification can be obtained: Exempt, Expedited, and Full IRB Review. After reviewing Walden University's (2014) Institutional Review Board Handbook, it appears that the Expedited Review would best fit this research topic. This topic examined the lived experiences of school counselors who work with students who have encountered RA. All participants in this study were over the age of 18. Therefore,

minimal risk was involved with this population of individuals. The purposive snowball sample selection of the participants of the study was intended to help minimize bias in the study. A snowball sample is a type of purposive sampling that allows for an opportunity to reach more potential participants as the purpose of a snowball sample is for the researcher to be able to gain access to participants who may have a direct knowledge of the topic of interest (Creswell, 2007). The purposive snowball sample selection of the participants of the study was intended to help minimize bias in the study. Participants were invited to participate in this study based on their participation in Facebook groups related to school counseling professionals. A brief description of what the study was about, and the target audience was provided in the invitation. Informed consent was provided to the participants who expressed interest with a more in-depth description of the research topic via a Google Form. Participants were screened to ensure that they were the best fit for the study based on the information they provided via the Google Form. Because expedited reviews also work to ensure the privacy of participant confidentiality, there was also a plan to maintain participant anonymity. Data was gathered through the use of interviews. All data gathered was entered into a password-protected database. All data will be kept for five years and available only to the dissertation committee members and me if necessary.

The most significant limitation of this proposed study was the sample. This study was confined to individuals who expressed interest in participating via email or social media. The study was limited to school counselors who have worked with AA girls who

experienced RA. Participation was limited to those who voluntarily agreed to be involved in the study.

Because this study was isolated to examine RA among girls who consented via social media, the number of total participants included in the study was eight participants. Small sample sizes tend to limit the generalizability of the findings. Because this was a correlational study only certain associations may be revealed (i.e. school counselor perceptions of student behavior), but there may be additional factors that affect the outcomes of the study. The cultural norms of African American girls could potentially influence the participants' thoughts about how RA was addressed with African American girls versus their non-African-American peers. The use of self-reporting was also a potential limitation of this study due to the possible distortions and personal biases. The personal interest and investment of the researcher could also pose a potential limitation.

It has been assumed that these school counselors understand the effect RA has on their lived experience in working with students. It has been further assumed that these participants have directly experienced working with students who encounter RA as either the victim or the perpetrator. It was assumed that school counselors are knowledgeable of the issue of RA among girls and have direct experience in addressing the issue. It was also assumed that school counselors are genuine and honest in sharing their experiences and opinions regarding bullying and RA.

Summary

This chapter summarizes the methodological procedures for examining the lived experiences of school counselors working with African American girls who have

encountered relationally aggressive behaviors. A qualitative hermeneutic-social learning approach was selected based on the limited research directly approaching the lived experiences of school counselors concerning their roles in combating RA. A qualitative hermeneutic-social learning approach allowed the researcher to gain a more in-depth exploration of the research question. Current literature supports justification for the use of this methodological approach. Chapter four will highlight the implementation of the proposed research design and provide an uncovering of the true essence of the phenomenon of the experience of counseling girls who encounter RA.

Chapter 4: Results

RA is an ongoing concern across the globe. Forms of RA have been seen in children as young as preschool age, ranging to adulthood (Crick et al., 1997; Ostrov & Keating, 2004). RA includes spreading rumors, exclusion from activities or groups, social isolation, gossip, eye-rolling, sarcasm, and revealing secrets (Taylor, 2008). In recent years, a *mean girl* mentality (Wiseman, 2002) has become very popular and is displayed through various forms of media. Effects of RA often led to poor self-esteem, depression, social isolation, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, school refusal, and in extreme cases suicidal ideation or suicide (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick et al., 2002; Taylor, 2008). Although bullying has become a common approach to handling dissatisfaction among peers, the topic remains understudied (Sawyer et al., 2011). Beebout-Bladholm (2010) specifically called for more qualitative research concerning RA among the female population.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of school counselors who work with African American adolescent females encountering RA. Excerpts from these school counselors' experiences are included in these results. A phenomenological approach was used to highlight the commonalities and differing views associated with these participants' experiences addressing RA with this population. Thematic coding and analysis were used to identify common themes based on the feedback of the participants. A qualitative hermeneutic-social learning phenomenology was used as the theoretical basis to establish the purpose of the research and interview questions. This chapter is outlined as follows: setting,

demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results of the study, and a summary of overall findings.

Research Question

RQ: What are the lived experiences of school counselors who work with African American girls who encounter RA?

Setting

I obtained all the participants via social media groups specific to school counselors. The participating individuals were diverse in respect to age, years of experience, and grade levels served. There was a total of eight participants due to the rich data provided throughout the course of these interviews. Transcription of the data from these interviews yielded over 50 pages of typed text. These interviews took place via a combination of phone interviews as well as Zoom calls, depending on participants' choice. No personal or organizational conditions influenced participants or their shared experiences during the time of these interviews. Lack of personal or organizational conditions decreased the likelihood of outside influence on the interpretation of the results of this study.

Data Collection

Eight participants were interviewed regarding their lived experiences as school counselors who work with African American girls who have participated in RA. The data collection tool used was an interview guide that consisted of several open-ended questions as well as follow-up questions. Participants had the option to participate in face-to-face, phone, or virtual interviews based on their personal preference. In

conducting the interviews, three of the participants opted for virtual interviews and five participants opted for phone interviews. The duration of these interviews lasted anywhere from 24 minutes to 56 minutes.

Each interview was recorded and then transcribed to document each interview verbatim. Each transcription was reviewed for accuracy. Member checking was used to ensure content validity and understanding of participant responses by allowing each participant to review their transcripts and identify any potential discrepancies. Each participant indicated that the transcriptions were accurate, yielding no discrepancies. The data collection process was followed as described in Chapter 3 with no changes or variations taking place. Data collection techniques used within this process included asking open-ended line of questioning, summarizing, paraphrasing, and reflective journaling.

Data Analysis

Each of the most common interview responses were used to hand code the data with the research question in mind of the lived experiences of school counselors in addressing RA in African American girls. Using in-depth interviews, audio recordings, and transcriptions, I was able to develop common themes.

Initially, I listened to each audio interview while reading along with the transcribed version of each interview to ensure no discrepancies. Coding techniques were utilized to help organize and analyze the data collected during this qualitative research investigation. Codes were generated based on words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs captured in the interviews using reflexive journaling. Frequently, I used the research

questions and codes/themes that appeared to direct me to the final codes for each interview. I then synthesized codes from the participant interviews into categories and subcategories and checked the condensed codes against my research questions regarding school counselors' lived experiences. This process helped me to generate a general description of school counselors' lived experiences in working with AA girls who experience RA.

Member Checking Experience

Dasein and Foresight/Fore-Conception

Each participant was provided with the opportunity to share their personal experiences surrounding the research topic. While some similarities existed between the participants' experiences, there were also some vast differences as well. Each participant was able to complete the interview and provide clarity and additional insight throughout the process. Member checking took place throughout the process to minimize the likelihood of any personal bias or influence seeping into the deep and rich accounts shared by the participants. Participants were able to share their views on why they feel girls participate in RA as well as techniques they use to address this type of behavior. Additionally, they were able to share their perceptions of how their colleagues and administrators view the topic as well as address needed changes to be able to better serve students who encounter this phenomenon. The participants were also able to share their outlooks on how race influences how instances of RA are addressed. The responses for each question varied among participants. At some points, there were sometimes various similarities in responses bringing forth great insights. However, there were also moments

where the views of the participants varied widely. For instance, on the topic of how seriously they feel their colleagues view the topic of RA, some of the participants expressed that their coworkers are very supportive in addressing and reporting instances of RA. Other participants divulged that they do not feel that some of their coworkers take the topic as seriously as they should, also adding that a colleague's race and own personal experiences with RA influences their personal level of seriousness surrounding the topic. The feeling of connectedness to responses discussed in the previous section was due to me being able to recall similar experiences to what some of the participants were sharing in their responses.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was verified by examining the outcomes' confirmability, credibility, and dependability. Member checking was used in the interview process to ensure that the information collected from participants accurately depicted the message they were trying to convey. Each participant reviewed the accuracy of the transcriptions and was allowed to provide clarity if needed, before coding. The information shared by participants was used verbatim in areas of these findings to provide rich descriptions of the information they provided. Credibility of this study was confirmed by the themes, patterns, and direct quotes of participants. Self-reflection was also incorporated to describe my personal feelings related to the information shared by the research participants and how it influenced my interpretations of the findings. Reflexive journaling was used to contemplate whether my personal biases interfered with my decision making. I would then revisit my analysis with clear thoughts.

Credibility

Credibility was used in this process to determine how each interview question related to the overarching research question. To guarantee credibility, I safeguarded that the findings of this study accurately depicted the lived experiences of the school counselors participating in this study. Additionally, my experience and knowledge working with African American girls as a school counselor was another factor of credibility. I was able to remain objective throughout this process by being aware of this factor and reporting the negative and positive results associated in my findings. Member checking was used in allowing participants to check over my transcribed data from the interviews to ensure that the message they were trying to convey was appropriately recorded.

Transferability

According to Creswell (2013), transferability is how well research results can be generalized across various settings and populations. The results of this study can be replicated in future studies using similar methods and procedures as the extant study to explore other potential research gaps. Thick descriptions were provided throughout this study to paint a more vivid view of the passion and emotions each participant expressed in their interviews. Additionally, to ensure transferability, I provided detailed descriptions of the participants' accounts to help the reader determine if the findings are transferable to their particular situations or settings.

Dependability

Dependability was established through the use of checking the transcripts for mistakes and confirming codes. This study was also approved by Walden University's IRB, confirming that the data collection and interview methods met university standards and ensured that no potential harm or unethical practices would be taking place (ACA, 2014). Additionally, journaling throughout the data gathering and analysis process allowed for explanations in researcher bias as well as provided transparency in what was discovered through the results of the study (Rudenstam & Newton, 2015).

Confirmability

Confirmability is when findings emerge from the data without bias (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Confirmability was achieved in the study by focusing solely on the findings and analysis that were revealed from the shared experiences of the participants rather than focusing on my prior knowledge of the phenomenon or personal biases. Through the use of reflexive journaling, I was able to keep personal biases in check as well as to notate discoveries made as a result of listening to the audio recordings of participant interviews in order to gain more familiarity with the outcomes. Member checks were also conducted throughout the process by verifying my analysis of the data with the experiences the participants were seeking to convey.

Results

Based on this study, the shared experiences of the school counselors who work with African American girls who experience RA revealed several findings. Many of the school counselors discussed a thorough understanding of issues associated with RA.

These school counselors were able to vocalize what they felt to be major factors that motivate this type of behavior in African American girls as well as their personal accounts on approaching this type of behavior with this student population. Further, they were able to discuss how their personal experiences with RA have helped shape their view on this phenomenon as well as their approach in addressing the topic of RA with African American girls.

The results of this study revealed cultural and social factors associated with African American girls' use of RA. School counselors shared thick and rich accounts while revealing the importance of building meaning and lasting connections with these students. There were no discrepant cases in this study to report, which further supports the validity in the participant's personal accounts. Overall, the results of this study reveal how the participants' thick descriptions of their encounters with this population answer the research question effectively.

Demographics

A total of eight participants took part in this study. Two of the participants have worked with students in all grade levels ranging from elementary to high school, three participants have worked with students in two levels (middle and high), one participant has served solely in a middle school setting, and two participants have served solely in an elementary setting. The demographic information presented will provide future implications for additional research, which will be discussed later in Chapter 5. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were provided for each participant. The chosen pseudonyms did not include any personal identifying information related to any of the

participants of this study, thus ensuring that these individuals would not be able to be identified based on the information shared. Table 1 outlines the demographic data collected below.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Experience	Grade levels	Education	CACREP	Age	Gender	Race
P1	4-7	M, H	Ma	Yes	30-39	F	Black/AA
P2	0-3	M	Ma	Yes	40-49	F	Black/AA
P3	4-7	M, H	Sp	Yes	30-39	F	Black/AA
P4	0-3	E	Sp	Yes	40-49	F	Black/AA
P5	4-7	E	Ma	Yes	40-49	F	Black/AA
P6	16+	E, M, H	Doc	Yes	50+	F	Black/AA
P7	12-15	E, M, H	Sp	Yes	40-49	F	Black/AA
P8	4-7	E, M, H	Sp	Yes	40-49	F	Black/AA

Note: E=Elementary, M=Middle, H=High School; Ma=Master's, Sp=Specialist, Doc=Doctoral

Illustrated Demographic Information

P1 is a 30-39-year-old AA female who has worked with students at the middle and high school levels. She holds a master's degree in school counseling and has between 4-7 years of experience in the field. She mentioned that she is very familiar with the topic of RA both from her childhood as well as within her role as a school counselor. She expressed that her past experiences being a victim of RA have helped to better equip her in her role of being empathic when addressing this topic with both victims and aggressors. P1 shared that she could recall a recent situation where a student came to her due to other girls talking about her hairstyle. Through techniques such as affirming the student, restorative practices, and conflict resolution, P1 stated that she has been able to help her students work through RA situations. Her hope is for AA girls to learn that they can get along and support one another due to the discrimination that they often already face from others. She further shared that her culture helps her to build connections with these young AA girls as well as advocate on their behalf to get coworkers and administrators to better understand the cultural aspects associated with this dilemma due to AA girls often being seen as the aggressors and being punished more severely for these types of acts than their counterparts of other races. P1 indicated that there are currently policies related to bullying in place in her state and school. However, she feels that these policies are vague and not specific to addressing RA specifically. Her insight into this phenomenon is that more collaboration needs to take place between teachers, counselors, and administrators to recognize the signs of RA early on as well as so that students can feel better supported and more comfortable in reporting these types of incidents.

P2 is a 40–49-year-old African American female with a master's degree in school counseling and less than 3 years of experience. She observed a group of young ladies who began to gossip about each other due to them all liking the same boy. She indicated that she feels that social media influence is a major factor as to why students result in the use of RA. She shared that she has observed RA occurring in long-term friendships and through the use of restorative circles and solution-focused approaches, she is able to work with her students. P2 also indicated that she feels her race and visibility within the school affords her with more opportunities to build relationships and trust with her AA female students.

P3 is a 30–39-year-old AA female who has worked with students in middle and high school settings. She shared that she feels that AA girls are generally the aggressors in instances of AA based on her personal experience. P3 shared that she will always advocate for these girls but that she is also going to be direct with them regarding their behavior. She shared that these girls are intentional with their actions. P3 also expressed that although she feels that AA girls are intentional, she advocates for them but is also very direct with them about their behavior. She shared that she wants these girls to realize that other cultures often already view them as being aggressive and having attitudes so she would like them to change the trajectory of their behavior. However, being an AA woman herself who has encountered RA, she feels that she is able to address these instances with girls.

P4 is a 40–49-year-old AA female with a specialist degree. She is a novice counselor with less than 3 years of school counseling experience in the field. P4 shared

that her approach with AA girls who encounter RA is based on her knowledge of the cultural and social dynamics that shape the experiences of these girls. She shared that although RA is sometimes difficult to detect, paying attention to subtle social and emotional cues of these students sometimes provides a gateway to recognizing and consequently addressing the RA behavior. P4 indicated that she addresses RA through the use of empathic approaches as well as restorative practices. In her experience, her colleagues equally view RA as important but are not always aware that it has occurred until the problem is at an escalated state.

P5 is an African American female school counselor with 4-7 years of elementary school counseling experience. She shared that she has observed AA girls to be viewed as either perpetrators or bystanders in instances of RA. She shared that seeing AA girls viewed as victims of RA is rare due to the way they are sometimes viewed by staff and administrators. P5 shared that she had her own personal accounts of being labeled as aggressive as a youth. She uses her personal experiences to help shape her approach in working with AA girls.

P6 is a 50+ African American female with over 16 years of experience. She has worked at all three educational levels. P6 has the most experience of all of the school counselors interviewed in this study. She is also the oldest participant in the study as well. P6 shared that she has experienced AA girls being intentional and cliquish in isolating others. She shared that her experience in this area has often revealed that the effects of RA can be quite harmful for the victims and many times for the perpetrators,

their actions are rooted in jealousy. She shared that she takes a solution focused approach in handling instances of RA.

P7 is a 40-45 African American female school counselor with 12-15 years of elementary, middle, and high school counseling experience. She expressed vast knowledge about the topic of RA, referring to the topic as girl bullying and mean girl behavior, noting that she learned about RA after getting into the school counseling profession.

P8 is a 40–49-year-old AA female who has been in the school counseling field for 4-7 years. She has worked in the elementary, middle, and high school settings and has a Specialist degree from a CACREP-accredited program. P8 shared that she has observed RA throughout her career. She described AA girls as being more argumentative. She works with these students by teaching them conflict resolution skills. P8's accounts of RA from her childhood motivate her to be vigilant in addressing instances of RA.

Thematic Meaning Units

Seven themes were derived from the lived experiences shared by the participants. The unfolding of these themes was based solely on the rich data gathered throughout the interviews. The research question (What are the lived experiences of school counselors who work with African American girls who encounter RA?), which guided the data collection and analysis process, helped establish four central themes and three subthemes because of this work. Table 2 highlights each theme, and which participants indicated an emphasis on the theme that would support reducing barriers to addressing RA in AA girls.

Table 2

Thematic Meaning Units

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Spreading Rumors	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
RA Erodes Self-Esteem	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Reassessing Anti-Bullying Policies	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Building Trusting Relationships in RA	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Teaching Prosocial Skills for RA	X	X	X			X	X	X
Jealousy Fuels RA		X		X	X		X	
AA Girls Viewed as Disrespectful	X		X	X			X	

Note: AA- African American, RA-Relational Aggression

Theme 1: Spreading Rumors

Each participant in this study expressed an understanding of RA as well as issues associated with RA behavior. The language used by the counselors in their responses includes descriptions of RA rather than types of behavior that characterize it. It emphasizes the inequity in social status. The gist of the counselors' comments was that RA is anything that looks like 'higher-ranking girls' using the mob mentality to isolate 'lower ranking' girls with the nonphysical weapons of disdain and humiliation through the use of rumors. Similar themes of spreading rumors and catty behaviors emerged in most interviewees' comments.

P1, P2, and P3 explicitly referred to the rumors being spread over social media. P1, with over 12-15 years of counseling experience, articulates this phenomenon as using

hurtful and often untrue rumors about victims that call on all possible tools to do the dirty work:

> RA bullying looks like a more popular or influential group of females coming together to ostracize, humiliate, gossip spread rumors, and/or threaten other females who are viewed as weaker or less popular. This takes place at school, via cell phone, and via social media. These girls come in often sharing drama about what someone has said via a text conversation or on a social media platform. I am left to diffuse and extinguish the situation.

P2, a novice counselor with less than 3 years of experience, described that kind of psychology as:

> Deliberate, calculated, mean, cold, and callous behavior towards others who are viewed as less superior or weaker than the bully. I have observed these girls to be very harsh in the things they say about others. It is almost as if they are willing to go to any length to make someone else look bad as long as they are seen by others as the most popular.

In contrast, P3 was less forceful but also invoked the distinctions in social rank by simply describing female bullying as behavior that "resembles being mean to other girls who may be less popular or less attractive." P3 learned that "RA can be equally damaging to its victims and aggressors." She understood that "this is a type of aggression that is oftentimes overlooked and ignored by others because victims aren't always forthcoming with sharing their information. The victims cry and are emotionally damaged because of these interactions" which has critically important implications for the educational sector.

P4, an elementary counselor who is new to the school counseling profession, said the same thing. She added the vital element that the dirty work usually or exclusively occurs in an environment that effectively excludes teachers and other authority figures:

> The cool kids or popular kids look down on the less popular kids who they believe won't stand up for themselves. Their main goal is to humiliate others and make them feel bad about themselves. Popular methods of performing these acts are now through social media, via text and cell phone, or other methods where adult supervision is limited.

P5, who has worked in an elementary setting "learned about this form of bullying through college courses and everyday experience seeing how sneaky and mean girls can be to one another" and described it as "a form of bullying where the person is attacked emotionally and mentally." For instance, P5 described this bullying as ignoring girls and acting as if they did not notice the victim, which leads to the victim being isolated and left out. P5 added, "In my experience, RA can sometimes appear to be passive due to the covert nature of it. However, the force that follows the silence and isolation can be detrimental for many of the victims."

P6, with over 16 years of school counseling experience and currently works with high school students in an alternative setting, described it as "female students targeting and picking on other students in the form of gossip, cyberbullying and leaving someone out on purpose." For P6, the aim of these "hurtful acts" was also frighteningly straightforward: "to make other girls feel awful about themselves and to shame them in front of friends, classmates, and peers."

P6 reported that “female bullying is about gaining popularity and status among peers” and is driven by “gaining power to make the victim feel helpless and hopeless.” The unfortunate reality is that “working in education for over 16 years working with students ranging from elementary to high school, gave P6 ample opportunity to observe “lots of RA in different settings.”

P7, who currently works in the elementary setting, also realized that RA is more often the tool of the female than the male bully, and learned on the job when she first began her career as an elementary school counselor:

> I have witnessed and stopped RA many times over the years. I know that this type of behavior is thought to be more common with girls, which is what I have also experienced in my time as an educator. I learned about this type of bullying being in the profession that I am in as well as from my personal experience in being bullied in this way as a child.

P8 said the same thing as P5, describing RA as “picking at others to cause a decrease in self-esteem and to make them do what you want them to do.” Also similarly to P6, P8’s “years of working in schools have helped reveal many things that children can do to be mean to each other.”

> When interviewing the participants of this study one of the main topics that emerged was the use of spreading rumors in order to alienate and gain power over victims. These counselors all reported learning about RA due to having a firsthand experience in their youth with this type of behavior, either as a victim,

aggressor, or both. These personal experiences of RA lead into the subtheme of approaching instances of RA.

Table 3 shows the most prominent type of behavior that school counselors expressed described RA bullying was spreading rumors. Frequent references to rumors, gossip and social media argue that bullies are just as likely to bully from relatively protected positions as directly, or more so. Specifically, spreading a rumor and gossiping, particularly online, is a less direct– and perhaps calculated – form of aggression.

Table 3

Spreading Rumors

Participant	Type of behavior
P1	*Spreading rumors*, ostracizing, public embarrassment, ignoring, harassment, teasing
P4	*Rumors*; gossiping; humiliation; facial expressions of disgust, pity and meanness; exclusion of peers
P6	*Spreading rumors*, gossiping, sending rude texts or social media posts, nasty/mean looks, excluding less popular girls
P2	*Spread rumors*, isolating the victim
P3	Catty behaviors, condescending remarks, mean dirty looks, rude girl
P5	Isolating the victim based on what they heard
P7	Friends gossip and *spread rumors*, cyberbullying, criticize appearances
P8	Exclusion, gossip, manipulation, *rumors*

Theme 2: RA Erodes Self-Esteem

This section addresses personal accounts of the participants' experiences with RA either in childhood or adulthood and how these experiences influenced their responses to

RA and bullying as school counselors. The participants, whether personally bullied as children or not, learned valuable lessons from it and refuse to tolerate it now as adults. However, an emergent warning from comments pertains to how a person develops their own perceptions of bullying and aggression.

P1 reported they learned valuable lessons from their childhood episodes:

> The experience really helped me to look at friendships and the way girls treat each other differently. Where I was once oblivious about the concept that you can be friends with everyone; I quickly changed my mindset after that experience. During that time, I felt very confused as to why this group of girls did not like me. They appeared to be popular and had more than I did; so, I couldn't understand their reason for disliking me to the point where we ended up being physically aggressive. I felt isolated after this time in my life, and I could not trust anyone. I even felt so angry that I contemplated bringing weapons to school to retaliate. But in that time of isolation, I found myself and my true identity.

All the participants were females. Their comments show that, as adults, all are intolerant of bullying. Seven of the eight educators reported that they had been bullied as children. P2 is the only participant who reported she was never bullied but expressed an understanding that bullying adversely affects those who are victimized. P2 shared the following:

> Bullying can cause you to question your self-worth as an individual. As an adult, I would take the “high road” and ignore the bully. I feel that I would make the individual jealous just by continuing to walk and live in my purpose.

P3 shared that her experience with bullying and aggression was so difficult that she ended up having to transfer to a different school:

> A group of girls I thought were my friends would pick on me because my family bought clothing from thrift stores. It got so bad that my momma had to go up to the school and I ended up switching schools. My peer group was not nice. I didn't understand why this was such a big deal to them. It broke my trust in people.

Similarly to P1, P4 shared:

> I felt isolated and powerless, unsure how to defend myself or who to turn to for support. The feeling of being singled out, along with the emotional toll it took, was significant. The bullying eroded my confidence, making me feel inadequate and self-conscious. It also created a sense of anxiety, making school a place of discomfort rather than learning and growth. Though I eventually overcame the bullying, it left a lasting mark on my self-esteem. It took time for me to rebuild my confidence and trust in others. However, it also taught me resilience and the importance of self-advocacy. My experience gives me a deep sense of empathy for those who are bullied.

P5 expressed

> I was bullied for a short period in my childhood, but I had support from my parents and school leaders, so I was able to make it through those tough moments. I did not allow the bullies to win because I knew I was better than them simply because I never tried to make others feel bad or put people down just to make myself look better or feel better.

P6 had also been bullied by others as a child. She learned to stand up for herself, and to handle the situation adroitly as an adult:

> I was picked on because I was extremely shy as a child and for the way that I talk. I was nervous and afraid to go to school. I was also afraid to tell an adult. As I got older, I started speaking up and standing up for myself. Honestly, I immediately go into defense mode when I know children are being bullied. Then, I think about my role as a school counselor and realize that I have to help all of the students.

For P7, RA was painful but taught her empathy. Like P4, the experience taught her to be extra-sensitive to incidents that truly constitute bullying: “It was a very difficult experience, and it made it difficult for me to go to school at times. Through my experience, I am able to empathize with other students and notice it when it happens.” P8 concurred, “Yes, I was bullied as a child.” And, echoing the above participants’ descriptions of the long-term effects, the experience was painful.

> I was the child who was always picked on or singled out because I had the support of my parents. How crazy is that, right?!? Well, the experience was terrible and it hurt so bad - for years - until I realized the silver lining in all of my prior experiences. They helped shape me into the person I have become today. I think it impacts the way I respond because I was often made to feel like I was doing something wrong by reporting the mean words that the other girls used to say to me. This is why I don't believe in shaming my students, but [instead] pulling them to the side to discuss it.

Theme 3: Reassessing Current Anti-Bullying Policies

This theme was derived because of conversations shared by participants regarding their own personal knowledge of anti-bullying policies and how they are implemented within their respective work settings. The discussion further addressed the inclusion of RA specifically and their personal accounts on whether RA was specifically addressed within these policies.

All participants acknowledged having anti-bullying policies within their schools or school systems. Each participant also expressed a need for improvements made to the existing bullying policies. P1 did not make specific recommendations for improvement. She referred to her current anti-bullying policies as being strict and indicated that her school's policy includes RA under the broader umbrella of bullying and harassment:

> I currently work in a district that has a strict anti-bullying policy. Our district prohibits any act of bullying, harassment, and/or intimidation that falls under the umbrella of RA. All students have a right to a safe and healthy school environment. All schools within the district should promote mutual respect, tolerance, and acceptance among students, staff, and volunteers. Typically, we do not have the same student to commit the act of bullying for a second time after receiving consequences. As of now, I do not believe there should be any changes to our policy. I just emphasize to our administration to remember the policy as it stands and to treat all students the same when assigning consequences centered around this matter. This policy fits my natural response style because I believe that all students should feel safe, respected, tolerated, etc. no matter who they are!

Both P2 and P3 expressed their disdain with the lack of specificity of addressing RA in these anti-bullying policies. P2 also had a recommendation for helping staff better understand and recognize the different types of bullying:

> In our school district there is a no tolerance bullying policy. SROs (school resource officers) review each case and provide serious consequences for these behaviors. The policy does not specifically address relationally aggressive behaviors. It places it all under one umbrella. The policies are effective, but the problem is getting staff to recognize the signs of all types of bullying, not just bullying in the physical sense.

P3 further shared that there seems to be a ‘gray area’ when it comes to RA, which carries an important implication for the field of education: clarifying RA compared to other forms of bullying. P3 said:

> RA kind of falls in the gray area because we know there is some sort of power level here, but it doesn't have the same fight as if you were just going to say bullying. So, making the definition inclusive of RA would help. And I know that social bullying, of course, falls under bullying, but RA isn't exactly explicitly talked about under that umbrella, in my experience. Spelling it out explicitly so that there are no holes, no gray areas. That way there's no room for guessing, nailing down what bullying looks like in a variety of forms, whether it be physical, whether it be on social media, or whether it be social with peers. Really taking the time to have that knowledge. I'm not saying to be experts, but to have enough knowledge to be aware and be able to identify each type.

P4 described their school's anti-bullying policies as something other than zero tolerance, although descriptions mirror zero tolerance guidelines. That does not mean that inequities do not plague the system. P4 purported that:

> Bullying policies in my school address bullying of all types. But honestly, students who bully through means of RA is not punished as harshly as students who bully through physical methods. That in itself is unfair and, as a school counselor, I advocate for this type of bullying to be taken seriously all the time, not only due to my past experiences as a victim but also, because I am well aware of the damaging effects that it can have on one's self-esteem and perception of self. I think getting staff to buy in to the seriousness of the whole concept of RA would drive for things to be enforced differently.

P4 indicated that although her school's current anti-bullying policies are inclusive of RA, she still recommended improving her school's anti-bullying policies by implementing prevention programs:

> Anti-bullying policies in my district are increasingly inclusive of relationally aggressive behaviors, and they offer several effective strategies, such as awareness-raising, restorative justice, and prevention programs. However, improvements like more specific training, stronger mental health support, and increased peer involvement could enhance their efficacy. These policies align well with my natural response style, which prioritizes empathy, restorative

practices, and proactive intervention. Through a more collaborative, understanding, and community-focused approach, policies can become even more effective in addressing RA.

P5's "school has a zero-tolerance policy for any form of bullying, including RA and physical bullying."

> I feel our zero-tolerance policy is very effective and the school works as a team in identifying it and effectively handling the situation. I feel that our policy does not need to be alternated. It works well with the school atmosphere and the students are educated on the different forms of bullying as well through guidance lessons and bullying awareness month.

P6 referred to the bullying policies in their school or system as being strict. Note in the following excerpts that several counselors provided recommendations for improving the situation; these are italicized for ease of identification. P6 shared that her district has a strict policy, but schools do not always follow these policies effectively. P6 additionally shared her thoughts:

> The school system has a zero-tolerance policy to bullying, including cyberbullying. Depending on the severity of the bullying, students can be suspended from school or charged by law. After the school counselor has addressed the minor cases of bullying and it continues, students are referred to the administrators and/or school police officer. I feel that the policies could be enforced more for maltreatment of the LGBTQ population. The policies fit with

> my natural response style because I like to intervene before the bullying escalates to physical behaviors.

Similarly, P7 called for administrators valuing the insight of school counselors in this process. Her school does have a mechanism for reporting, but she stressed that these reports of RA are not always viewed as severe as other instances of bullying behavior. But further, she called for adding preventive programs to educate the students about the dire consequences of bullying:

> Unfortunately, I do not always feel that RA or girl bullying is taken as seriously as it should be. I think the powers that be needed to begin listening directly to the students and school counseling professionals to gain a better understanding of how new policies can help alleviate some of the stressors associated with the thought and fear of being bullied. Our school has good policies in place, but I think administrators and staff should be better trained in what to look for, especially with RA, in order to be able to enforce these policies at a greater level.

Finally, similarly to P6, P8 shared:

> The current bullying policy that I am familiar with is the Zero Tolerance policy to bullying that is in effect by the school system. This policy works for the schools who are following it; however, there are some schools who are not following the policy, which causes continual bullying. Students resort to bringing weapons to school as a result of not feeling safe. I feel that the perpetrators should have to go through a mandatory mediation program at the district level.

Theme 4: Building Trusting Relationships

In this section, participants discussed the methods that they use to build more cohesive bonds with their students. They also discussed catalysts that help fuel a deeper connection that results in student trust and vulnerability to share instances of RA. Further, these participants discussed factors that they feel play a role in whether victims choose to report or not report bullying behavior to school officials. This section shows that the four keywords that emerged from these school counselors' perspectives on recognizing that if a girl is being victimized by peers were trust, fear, the belief that nothing will be done, and the stigma of being a snitch. Five of the participants admitted that it is difficult to detect RA and three characterized victims as socially isolated.

Although P1 and P2 did not outwardly state that they make themselves visible, they both discussed recognizing subtle changes in student behavior that lent them to having a segue into engaging in conversation with the students regarding these strained peer relationships as a result of potentially experiencing RA. P2 additionally shared that if a student is fearful enough of their bully, they may not report this form of aggression unless parents get involved.

P1 expressed how to recognize changes in students but also discussed that RA can be hard to pinpoint due to barriers that exist. She also discussed the level of comfort students have reporting these instances as well as fear of these students being labeled as a snitch:

> I typically recognize a girl who is being victimized by peers from the way she withdraws or isolates herself from others. One factor that I believe plays a role in

> whether a victim chooses to report or not is who they feel comfortable reporting to, and the fact that they do not want to be considered a "snitch" or "tattle-tail", or that some form of retaliation may occur. Whether they feel that you can relate to them and what they are experiencing and if they trust you enough to share such important information. The more education they receive on bullying, the more they are able to seek help and know that they have support."

Similarly, P2 shared:

> I notice a girl may be victimized by peers when she often seems withdrawn and avoids social interactions, which could indicate she feels unsafe. After having a conversation or several conversations with the victim, I often learn that they do not report the bullying because they do not believe they will be taken seriously by adults or they think the bully will come at them even harder in the future.

P3 described children as being 'creatures of habit' and stated that if you watch their patterns, you can generally notice when something is off with a friend group or when a student is being isolated:

> I make it a point to be out in the hallways and being able to see the kids move to classes and whatnot. You see these students with the same people every day, so when something changes, you will be able to notice that instantly. And I think all I had to do was listen and watch. And honestly, the streets are talking. I really try to get ahead of it before it's too bad because I've seen situations like this get very ugly for young students. I think victims may not feel the consequence for the aggressor is appropriate. Sometimes it may end up being that situation occurred in

> the community and school can't actually do anything for them. Or they don't feel like the person that they need to go to is trusted enough to work the process, or to really take them seriously.

P5's perspective included reference to being afraid of the bully as well as to trust of authority figures:

> The victim has to feel comfortable enough to be able to report the situation. They have to trust that something will be done. They also have to trust that they won't be ridiculed (by students or teachers) for making the report and that they won't have further repercussions with the bully or bullies after making the report.

P6 brings up a point that recognition depends on the grade level under consideration. Her comments suggest that RA is easier to recognize among younger girls because bullying becomes more sophisticated with time:

> I feel that it is much more difficult to detect instances of RA when it is exhibited by girls in middle and high schools. In fact, it is extremely hard to recognize at these levels. Many times, by the time I find out about it, much of the damage has already been done. Reputations are already ruined; girls are already humiliated, etc. A major barrier is that children simply don't want to be viewed as snitches, and they are too afraid to tell an adult what is happening.

Two of the school counselors mentioned increased visibility in common areas that students frequent as being a key factor in building these connections that lead to a more cohesive relationship with these students. P7, like P3, mentioned the importance of being visible. P7 said:

> I have a trusting and open relationship with my students and most times they will report to me when something is going on. However, there are times when this is not always the case. I try to make myself visible and present in the hallways. I include myself in their spaces like the cafeteria, playground, etc. to observe interactions. Sometimes I am able to pick up on things when people are not engaging with their normal friend group. One of the main barriers in my opinion is that some girls have already learned to mask their emotions, so this makes it difficult to detect.

P8 further discussed how trust plays a vital role in students' willingness to report instances of RA. P8 shared the following regarding the importance of trust:

> I feel that the level of trust they have in their teachers, counselors, and administrators play a vital role in whether or not they choose to report. If a student feels that they have been let down by these individuals in some way in the past, I feel that they will be more reluctant to share what they are going through.

Theme 5: Teach Prosocial Skills to Combat RA

Some of the participants discussed their approach to RA and how their own personal experiences helped shape the way they go about addressing the topic with their students. They discussed teaching prosocial behaviors due to understanding the detriment and lasting effects caused by RA. Some of the participants discussed that they sometimes must remind themselves that their role is to help both the victim and aggressor to overcome the remnants of the use of RA due to their own personal experiences of being victimized in their past, either as children or adults.

P1 expressed during the interview that she pulls the students in and conducts a student led conflict resolution session. She shared that using facilitating this discussion, her students are generally able to come to a resolution and move forward. However, she notifies administrators and parents of the encounter in case issues arise again. She said:

> I leave room for the students to decide who will lead the conversation, and allow the conversation to flow naturally. After a solution is discussed, and we come to a resolve, each student apologizes and asks for forgiveness. Sometimes the other party does not accept the apology, and that is fine. But I make it known that the situation is over and that we will no longer need to revisit this matter. I inform the administration and parents of the conflict resolution that takes place so that they are aware of the steps taken.

P2 and P3 were much more nonsensical in their approaches by P2 stating that "a no bullying contract is implemented," noting that the student will receive more severe consequences if the behavior is repeated. Consequently, P3 stated that her approach is to "call them to the carpet every time. Of course, I teach them appropriate ways to respond through using social-emotional learning, "I" statements, and other cognitive behavioral methods but I start by calling them out on their behavior". She stated that she does this in hopes of getting the girls to see the severity of their actions. In my experience, I have done both and have seen each as being effective in some cases. However, at the high school level, I have also experienced students who viewed the contract as just a piece of paper and thus, they continued to harass and ostracize their intended target.

P5 shared that she tends to be “a listening ear, offering a safe space, educating them on how to respond”. P6 shared that she uses small group opportunities with her students that focus also on creating more prosocial behaviors and positive interactions in their communication with others. P6 shared that she uses these small group experiences to “build rapport, effective communication, and cognitive-behavioral approaches that focus on identifying change in negative behaviors and thoughts while focusing on more positive behaviors.” P7 shared that her use of conflict resolution reinforces the importance of the character education lessons being taught on this subject as well as going a step further and meeting individually with both the victim and perpetrator individually.

Similarly to P1, P7 shared “I currently teach conflict resolution skills, and I conduct a girl’s group with clear goals and expectations that are focused on Self-Control, Displaying Self-Respect, Displaying Positive Attitude, Practice Femininity, Perseverance, and Accountability.” P8 shared:

> I am currently doing a lot of conflict resolution with students. I also speak a great deal with both the victim and perpetrator individually. I also feel that teaching and reinforcing character education lessons consistently helps reinforce the severity of this topic as well. These lessons are given to boys and girls within the school.

Theme 6: Jealousy Fuels RA

Each participant indicated several reasons they believe AA girls engage in RA, what it looks like, and how these students are affected by this form of bullying behavior. Seven of the eight participants had been victims of bullying themselves and felt that in

many of their personal instances, jealousy was one of the main motivators for this type of mean and callous behavior. One participant indicated that she had never experienced bullying but also felt that jealousy and insecurities of the bully were motivators for this type of behavior. These participants also attributed female RA to disagreeable home lives, undeveloped self-identity, simple meanness, or lack of social skills. They said bullying was a way to offset or redirect these personal deficits.

P2 expressed that the use of social media is a major contributor to why RA occurs. P2 shared: “Social media plays a significant role in motivating RA because so many underage individuals have access to it, and they are not being monitored by adults.” P4 contributed:

> RA is motivated by a combination of social, emotional, and environmental factors. These can include the desire for social power, jealousy, insecurity, and the need to maintain or elevate social status within a peer group. Unlike physical bullying, RA is often subtle and manipulative, involving behaviors such as exclusion, spreading rumors, or damaging someone's reputation. Girls who feel insecure about themselves or their relationships with others may use RA to control their environment or attack those they see as threats.

P5 noted that the main goal of the aggressor is to “destroy character and reputation, downgrade, and isolate others in order to become the queen bee.” P7 shared:

> I think that jealousy and insecurity in oneself is what drives RA. These young girls are so driven by the perceptions of what is put out in tv shows and movies and they tend to have a warped perception of reality and what it should be. I feel

> that the use of RA helps these girls gain the power and popularity they are in search of. To me, the typical RA bully is one who is well known around the school (either for popularity or reputation), one who others gravitate to but cannot tell you what is so special about this person. This person secretly has their own insecurities but belittles and intimidates others so that their own skeletons do not fall out of their closets. I think being a victim and bully of RA is equally confusing and lonely. The victim is trying desperately to be accepted or avoid being picked on while the bully only has friends due to forcing or coercing these connections.

P8 who's response was like P5, shared that she felt RA is motivated by the desires of "popularity, leadership, and influence over others".

Theme 7: AA Girls Viewed as Disrespectful

Several of the participants in this study mentioned issues related to the way African American girls are viewed and addressed in instances of RA versus their counterparts of other races. The participants explained the importance of speaking up for and educating others about African American girls and the way they respond in social situations to help other cultures understand that African American girls are not always responding from a place of malice or disrespect.

P1 expressed that their responsiveness to RA with AA girls is rooted in understanding race and culture. She discussed addressing this topic with girls with empathic approaches while also educating them on the societal views of others. P1

subsequently also mentioned feeling as if she were a “school mom or aunt” when working with African American female students. Pl shared:

> I think that my experience with addressing RA with AA female students differ from when I address other students because I relate more to those students. For the most part, when I speak to AA girls, I am very direct. I try my best to explain to the students about the image that we, as AA girls portray individuals of other races/ethnicity when we mistreat each other. Other races already view us as aggressive and attitudinal when many of us have had to learn to speak up and use our voice so that we are not overlooked. I explain to them that even though it does not give other races the right to mistreat us, most of them will try to do how they see us treat each other, even AA boys and men. I also give them different outlooks of how I, as an AA girl and now, woman address(ed) those matters related to RA.

P3 explained that although she feels AA girls are the main culprits behind RA in many instances, she will still advocate for them because she feels that their responses often go misunderstood. She also expressed being direct and calling these students out on their behavior toward one another:

> I feel like they [AA girls] make us look bad as a culture of Black people where people already have their perceptions of us and this aggression leans into the bias. Advocating for these young ladies in the same breath and advocating equally. They're not a threat to anybody but that is how they are viewed by society. It's almost like having your feet on both sides. I warn them about what

> they do and how they treat other people, but I'm also going to bat for them equally to make sure that yes, they did wrong. But I want to know they are treated fairly and appropriately because there is often the potential bias of the administrator. I enjoy being African American and working with these African American young ladies because I get to create a space where I can really keep it real with these ladies. I don't have to put on and I'm going to give it to them in the terms that I know that they're going to understand. I've kind of shared that the undercurrent of bias in the way people view us as aggressive, even if we're not aggressive, I feel like I'm able to really relate and talk them through some of these things just because we kind of share these racial and cultural bonds.

Another revelation that took place as a result of one of the participant's responses was that they felt that the background and culture of their colleagues depended upon how they felt about and or addressed instances of RA. P3 stated:

> Black people are aggressive and that's just naturally what we are, what we do. But I would say white, white folks who don't like it, they're not fans and I don't know if they understand that this is a way of communication for many Black people. So, I really think it has to do with cultural bounds, or even how you were raised, as in what did you see wherever you were raised. Disciplinary actions that are brought down on African Americans end up being worse many, many times than students of other races.

P4 had similar thoughts to P1. P4 shared:

> My approach to addressing RA among African American female students are

> informed by an understanding of the cultural, social, and racial dynamics that shape their experiences. This requires more attention to identity, stereotypes, communication styles, and community connections. Recognizing the unique challenges, they face from racialized aggression to stereotypes about behavior helps in creating a supportive environment where they feel understood and safe. Being culturally responsive and intentional in addressing these specific needs leads to more effective intervention and prevention strategies, as well as more empathetic and inclusive approach to their well-being.

P7 shared that she is concerned that African American girls are often viewed in a negative light automatically, whether they are the victim or aggressor in the situation. P7 expressed:

> I think in many instances Black victims are viewed as being overly dramatic and their feelings are minimized which in turn makes them more reluctant to report. I believe Black aggressors are viewed as girls with attitude problems and are viewed as being disrespectful and seen as "a problem". These girls are usually targeted more often and punished more harshly than girls of other races.

Further, P7 mentioned taking an “auntie approach” that is familial in nature in the African American community, as aunts are often viewed as mother figures in the culture. P7 mentioned affirming AA girls and reminding them that “as Black girls and women, they should exhibit positivity and uplift one another instead of tearing each other down.”

On the heels of the view that cultural aspects are associated with RA, the next section presents participants' perspectives on their knowledge of current anti-bullying policies and how inclusive these policies are as it relates to RA specifically.

General Narrative

All the participants in this study have encountered addressing RA with African American girls in various ways. Some of these school counselors discussed meeting the needs of their students from an empathic and conflict resolution perspective. Each one of the participants purported that building connections and meaningful relationships with their students helps to enhance the level of trust, thus making this population of students more likely to report instances of RA. While P3, P5, and P7 attributed relationally aggressive behaviors in African American girls being built upon social and environmental constructs, P1, P2, P4, P6, and P8 all felt the main motivation behind RA to be rooted in jealousy and secret insecurities of the aggressor.

All of the school counselors reported that they assumed the role of mediator and problem solver when addressing RA based on one of the main duties of school counselors being to meet the social and emotional needs of students. P3, P4, and P6 indicated that they used conflict resolution and restorative approaches as methods of addressing RA in AA girls. P2 and P5 reported using solution-focused approaches to mediate RA. All of the counselors described strict anti-bullying policies within their schools and districts. P2, P3, and P7 discussed how their respective schools/districts could be more specific in addressing RA and getting school staff the proper training to recognize and address this phenomenon. There was a consensus amongst all the participants that conveyed the

message if students feel heard and validated, they are more likely to report incidences of RA.

General Description

School counselors who encounter RA with African American girls approach this phenomenon in various ways. School counselors reflect a consensus that relationally aggressive behavior is emblematic of higher-ranking girls, or 'ring leaders,' employing a collective mentality to marginalize 'lower-ranking,' 'outcast' girls through non-physical means such as disdain and humiliation. Sometimes the needs of these students are met through conflict resolution and empathy. Building connections and meaningful relationships with students helps to enhance the level of trust that encourages students to be more comfortable reporting instances of RA. Relationally aggressive behaviors in African American girls are often attributed to social and environmental factors. The main motivation behind RA appears to be rooted in jealousy and secret insecurities of the aggressor.

School counselors are often awarded with the assumed role of mediator and problem solver when addressing RA. This is in part due to one of the main duties of school counselors being to meet the social and emotional needs of students. Conflict resolution and restorative approaches are a couple of methods used when addressing RA in AA girls. School counselors sometimes use solution-focused approaches to mediate instances of RA. School counselors express that strict anti-bullying policies are in place in schools, but these policies harbor a need for more specificity in outlining RA within these policies. School counselors also see a need for school staff to receive additional

training to recognize and address this phenomenon. School counselors also suggest if students feel heard and validated, they are more likely to report incidences of RA.

Phenomenological Reflection

Through unique experiences, these school counselors experience *Dasein* by being school counselors working with African American girls in school settings. For school counselors, being-in-the-world is a matter of figuring out ways to address relationally aggressive behaviors in African American girls. These counselors discussed cycling through the hermeneutic circle, using various tools and techniques such as the use of conflict resolution skills, small group sessions, and empowerment opportunities to address the RA their students encountered. While helping these students and remembering fore-sight from their own childhood experiences, counselors were forced to look outside of themselves. This challenged these participants to look beyond factors such as their race and their own personal involvement in RA.

As the school counselors experience being-with students, they anticipate that their skills in unison with their knowledge and experience of RA will allow them to better support students. Revisions of fore-conceptions take place when school counselors can address AA girls encountering RA more realistically. In *Dasein, Mitsein* unfolds for these participants in the discoveries of working with these girls where the unique contribution of each participant lends to an experience that is tellingly significant and collaborative.

For example, the school counselors who report having encounters with RA themselves discuss how their self-esteem was deflated as children. One participant discussed how she works to uplift and empower victims as well as to educate aggressors

about the effects of RA. *Mitsein* took place when these school counselors could detect and address instances of RA in the girls, they work with due to being cognizant of what to look for. These participants changed their way of being-in-the-world using techniques to promote more prosocial behavior as well as give meaning to the way they think and respond in instances of RA, thus responding in more caring ways. The school counselors also begin to immerse themselves in the common spaces of the students as *Mitsein* increases. Thus, forming more cohesive and trusting connections with the students which in turn allowed for both counselors and students to have a more enriched experience.

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the results of the lived experiences of school counselors who work with African American girls who encounter RA through the use of themes and summaries. The essential themes presented offer insight into how school counselors understand and approach RA as well as the cultural and social factors associated with supporting African American girls who encounter RA. Consistent with existing literature, the findings of this research may assist school counselors and educators in navigating intervention systems to combat RA, gain foresight on recognizing and addressing cultural and systemic factors, and lend to more empathic and inclusive approaches when addressing instances of RA with African American girls. Chapter 5 will provide more in-depth conclusions and guidelines for future research based on the current findings. In addition, a vast interpretation of findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, implications for social change, and conclusions of the overall study will be presented.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic social learning phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of school counselors who work with African American girls who encounter RA. I investigated the unique life experiences of eight school counselors and their first-hand knowledge of the subject of RA through personal experience in their capacity as school counselors. Eight counselors participated in this research study. Their experience ranged from novice to very experienced. In this chapter, I discuss the key findings of the study concerning the literature on school counselors encountering African American girls who experience RA. Further, I focus on all of the supportive, contradictory, and surprising findings along with implications for school counselors as well as others in education and recommendations for future research.

The results of this study were significant in several areas. First, among the school counselors who were interviewed, it was revealed that these individuals had extensive knowledge on understanding the issues associated with girls engaging in RA. This revelation extended to address the motivators for this behavior, how each individual participant approaches the topic of RA with their AA female students versus other students, and how each participant's own personal encounters with RA influence how they address this subject with their students. These school counselors shared very rich and meaningful experiences surrounding the cultural and social factors associated with how RA is viewed and addressed when Black girls are victims or aggressors of this behavior. An in-depth discussion also took place about their views surrounding current antibullying policies and recommendations for improvement along with the importance

of establishing meaningful connections in order to build trusting relationships with students in order for them to feel comfortable reporting instances of RA. The results of this study contribute to the body of research on RA regarding school counselors' lived experiences, which revealed both confirmations as well as disparities from prior research.

Interpretation of Findings

In this section, I discussed ways these findings aligned with or disproved the findings of the peer-reviewed literature that was presented in Chapter 2 of this study. These findings were also analyzed and interpreted based on the three theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 2: hermeneutic phenomenology, social learning perspective, and relational cultural theory. I specifically discussed how my experiences as the researcher influenced how the data from the interviews was interpreted as well as the effects my personal experiences had on the interactions with the participants and how the extant study enhances the current literature around school counselors working with African American girls.

Dialogue With Literature

Scholarly literature about RA has historically focused on middle-class Caucasian girls (Leff et al., 2010). There has also been a minimal focus on the lived experiences of school counselors in prior research. The results of this study revealed there was information that surfaced that was very revealing for future research. Historically there has been little research surrounding RA that focused on African American girls. Research also revealed that African American girls are more disproportionately punished and viewed negatively than girls of other races who exhibit similar behavior (Morris & Perry,

2017). This gap in literature was the stimulus for the present study. This section discusses what the literature shows about RA and African American girls and how this present body of literature relates to the experiences of the participants who completed this study.

RA Defined

Prior literature defined RA as behavior that is covert, secretive, and concealed in nature and is meant to cause harm through exploitation, injury, or manipulation of peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 1996; Spears et al., 2009; Young et al., 2006). The driving purpose of RA is to manipulate social relationships to damage the intended targets' reputation (Hensums et al., 2023). Research indicates that females place a high value on popularity and social status in peer relationships and thus willfully manipulate others through rumors to damage the reputation of others they view as a threat (Casper & Card, 2017; Jiménez & Estévez, 2017). The nonviolent nature of these forms of aggression is what often allows them to go undetected but the emotional scars that can be left on the victims can cause severe long-term effects. All of the participants in the current research study described RA in similar terms as highlighted in the literature. These participants noted the covertness and deviance associated with engaging in RA. They each provided accounts of the girls they work with who engaged in this type of behavior, describing that the behaviors were similar to what was described in prior literature, being motivated by damaging reputations to gain higher social statuses within their schools or peer groups.

The overall consensus of the school counselors participating in this study was that RA is a form of bullying behavior that is quiet and difficult to detect. This form of

bullying is often motivated by the desire to gain social power or status. Additionally, some participants felt that this form of bullying takes a group effort, purporting that the more people who join in with this behavior provide more swift outcomes of isolating and alienating the intended victims. This notion supports prior research which suggests the catalyst for using RA is to gain social power over a peer or peer group (Jimenez & Estevez, 2017). The overall consensus of these respondents included versions of explanations such as intentionally causing a decrease in the self-esteem of others, gaining popularity or status, and gaining power. Several of the participants even went on to discuss how the outcomes of RA can be just as harmful for the aggressor as it is for the victim. This supports prior research by Yoon et al. (2004) and Swank et al. (2018) which both state these rumors and gossip can not only damage the reputation of the victim but could also lead to future difficulties in forming peer relationships for both victims and aggressors.

Development of RA

Literature on the development of RA revealed that children gain more resilience by using RA as their verbal abilities increase (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015; Young et al., 2006). Research also revealed that RA was exhibited in children as young as preschool age and continues into adolescence and adulthood (Aizpitarte et al., 2017; Crick et al., 1997; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2023). Research also revealed that RA appeared to be more useful as this type of aggression is not always disruptive to regular classroom functions, thus getting overlooked by adults (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2019). Results of my study reinforce what has historically been presented. Most of my

participants discussed how they see acts of RA beginning to form at the primary and elementary levels as children exclude others from peer groups or decide not to be another child's friend one day but embrace friendship with the same child on other days. They further discussed their experiences that RA tends to intensify as girls get older and the importance of friendships and relationships becomes greater. Some of the participants even discussed how RA sometimes takes place in the workplace between adults.

Gender Differences

The gender focus of this study consisted of school counselors' experiences with girls. The participants in this study spoke from their experiences with females, noting that girls tend to be obsessed with popularity and notoriety from their peers. A few of the participants in this study also suggested that boys do not always care about social status as much as girls do. Prior research also revealed that girls exhibited more relationally aggressive behaviors than boys and that boys used more physically aggressive actions with their peers (Crick et al., 1997; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015).

One participant in my study noted from her experience that the boys she has worked with do not care about being liked by everyone or being the most popular person in the world. She shared that they fight about their problem and get it over with. She shared that her experience with girls is that they tend to hold grudges and are more fixated on friendships and relationships than the boys are. These revelations are supported by scholarly literature (Leadbeater, 2010; Swank et al., 2018). Studies showed that while males tend to exhibit more physical forms of aggression that result in kicking, punching, and hitting, females typically participate in gossip, spreading rumors, peer

exclusion, isolation, and stealing friends (Crick et al., 1999; Crothers et al., 2005; Seals & Young, 2003). Research also reinforced the experiences of the participants by revealing that social status becomes increasingly important as girls get older (Fite & Pedersen, 2018; James et al., 2010).

RA and African American Girls

Most of the participants in this study revealed that there continues to be vast disconnects in the way African American girls are addressed regarding issues of RA versus their counterparts of other races. This supports prior studies that purported African American girls are often viewed as disrespectful, unfeminine, and delinquent, resulting in unequal treatment and consequences related to RA in comparison with female peers of other races (Gregory & Thompson, 2010; Monahan et al., 2014; Voulgaridou, et al., 2023). Several of the participants called for better advocacy efforts for African American girls as well as more opportunities for training on cultural awareness for school officials since it is believed that African American girls are not always responding from a place of malice or disrespect.

These assertions support Singletary and Johnson's (2020) research that revealed a dire need for more education for school officials and parents on responding to African American females in more culturally appropriate ways due to the revelation of higher rates of suicidality among this population due to how they were treated as a result of the use of RA. Research findings of Swank et al. (2018) supports the thoughts of some of the researchers who expressed the importance of understanding cultural identity, stereotypes, and communication styles associated with working with African American girls.

Participants shared that by recognizing the unique challenges faced by racialized aggression to preconceived stereotypes surrounding the behavior of African American girls, school counselors, and other educators can help empower this population of students and help them feel better understood.

School Counselors' Role in RA

According to ASCA (2023), school counselors foster the social-emotional development of students in a variety of ways. Group counseling, classroom guidance lessons, and collaboration with teachers and parents are some of the main ways school counselors address the mental health needs of students to promote prosocial behavior. All of the participants in this study self-affirmed that they view themselves as individuals inside the school building who provide interventions related to enhancing social skills and social-emotional learning (SEL). They also identified as being the individuals who handle instances of RA whether it was an assumed role or directed by their administrators. These views support prior research that shows that school counselors conduct SEL programs, use small group interventions, and use individual counseling to help aid in the social and academic success of students (Cipriano, 2023; Durlak et al., 2011). Many of the participants in this study also discussed how they implement techniques such as restorative practices, conflict resolution, and small group counseling that focuses on teaching prosocial behaviors. Cipriano et al. (2023) indicated that students tend to be more engaged and have more positive relationships with adults in the school when they feel a sense of connectedness. Using social emotional learning, individual, and group counseling, school counselors can teach these skills to students and help build

more cohesive and trusting relationships. These efforts support ASCA's stance that school counselors are experts in social emotional development, suggesting that school counselors implement such programs to enhance the development of students.

Research also revealed that school counselors serve in a capacity that allows for greater connection with students using SEL programs (Cipriano, 2023). These students also tend to be more engaged and have more positive relationships with their teachers and other adults within the school as a result of participating in SEL programs (Cipriano et al., 2023; Leff et al., 2018). This level of connectedness places school counselors in a key position to provide support around SEL as well as providing a platform to stress the importance of the various stakeholders they encounter.

Most of the counselors in this study noted they work with the students by building these connections and then by teaching empowerment and resilience which aligns with the use of Baker Miller's (1976) relational cultural theory that suggests for a person to operate as their best self, they had to have healthy and authentic connections in their relationships with others (Davidson, 2018). However, due to role ambiguity, it is sometimes difficult for school counselors to adequately serve in their roles, although research continues to show an elevated level of support from school counselors in social-emotional development (Goodman-Scott, 2018; Nordahl et al., 201). This research supported the thoughts of three of the participants in this study. The participants noted that they are firm on ensuring their students understand that they are the school counselors, and their role is to help promote healthy peer relationships as well as assist

with academic and career success. However, these participants expressed that they sometimes felt they were being presented as disciplinarians by their administrators.

Outcomes of RA

As reinforced by the outcomes of prior research, the participants in this study echoed the harmful effects of RA. Participants voiced how these school age girls are adversely affected by ostracism, gossip, lies, and social isolation that led to low feelings of self-worth, depression, low self-esteem, poor school performance and many other issues (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick, 2002; Konishi & Hymel, 2009; Taylor, 2008). Most of the research participants additionally gave accounts of how their own personal encounters with RA in their youth led to feelings of low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy for many years. Most of the participants reported being able to relate to responding to RA effectively due to knowing how the outcomes of this phenomenon can make one feel from first-hand experience. Prior research further revealed that students who were more exposed to relational and peer aggression had significantly higher levels of trauma as well as increased feelings of loneliness other social and psychological maladjustments and were more likely to contemplate suicide (Carney, 2008; Godleski & Ostrov, 2013). While none of the participants outwardly referred to outcomes of RA leading to suicidal ideations, they did express many forms of social and psychological maladjustments such as poor peer relationships, social isolation, and depression.

Social Influences

Research revealed that the importance of building relationships with students is a direct correlation to the likelihood of girls reporting instances of RA. This research

extends the current knowledge by focusing on social and relational factors. Children are influenced greatly by their family members, but the peer groups with which children regularly associate also influence the way that they behave and interact (Card et al., 2005; Hensums, 2023; Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). Prior research revealed that one of the main impetuses for acts of RA is to gain social status or influence over others (Hensums et al., 2023). Prior research has also found that children use RA to enhance their social relationships, leading to damaging effects for both the victims and aggressors of relationally aggressive behaviors (Card et al., 2005; Hensums, 2023; Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). This reinforced findings in the current study which revealed participants found social factors to be a major influence in their students' use of RA. Most of the participants expressed that the need to be accepted by peers is of high importance to students in their schools, particularly female students.

RA and School

Research revealed that the effects of RA can be felt in school classrooms, hallways, libraries, bathrooms, and cafeterias (Kuppens et al., 2008; Voulgaridou, 2023) due to the covert nature of RA and teacher's oblivion to the calculating covert tactics used in this form of aggression. Many of the school counselors in this study expressed that they make themselves visible within the common spaces of the school to establish greater trust with students as well as observe student interactions in an effort to help curtail instances of RA. Prior research also revealed that teachers are not always cognizant of what to look for regarding RA due to it being more discreet, quiet, and difficult to detect (Kuppens et al., 2008; Low et al., 2010; Yoon et al., 2004). Also,

unstructured areas such as playgrounds and cafeterias make the gossip and isolation that takes place in these unstructured settings difficult to detect as well.

Although research revealed that schools provide guidelines and policies for handling bullying behaviors, RA remains a gray area based on research findings. Participants in this research revealed that they have zero-tolerance bullying policies within their schools and districts. However, there are concerns related to how instances of RA are handled. Prior research discussed how school counselors participating in their study revealed that there was a call for more bullying prevention programs specifically to address issues of RA and changes in terminology used in current bullying laws (Swank et Al., 2018). Participants in this study supported studies like the one by Swank et al. (2018) by expressing a call for more terminology related to RA as well as more training for school staff on how to recognize the phenomenon.

Barriers

The participants in this study expressed that key barriers to addressing RA include teachers and staff being unaware of what to look for and the reluctance of girls to report relationally aggressive behaviors. These revelations coincide with prior research that suggests these have been barriers for some time (Low et al., 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Perry & Ostrov, 2023). The difference in the current study was how the race and gender of students are sometimes a barrier. Participants' perceived views of how some of their colleagues and administrators respond to instances of RA as well as their perceived negative views of interactions with African American girls encountering RA was also highlighted as a potential barrier.

Limitations of the Study

This study provided a wealth of information regarding the lived experiences of school counselors encountering girls who experience RA; however, limitations also existed within this study. As stated in Chapter 1, the most significant limitation of this study was the sample size. Because this study was isolated to the use of phenomenological hermeneutics, the number of participants included was small. Small sample sizes tend to struggle to speak to the rich experiences of the entire population of school counselors (Andrade, 2020).

However, saturation was reached with the eight participants in the study once it was revealed that many of the responses became repetitive. Although the sample size was small in number, the results revealed a great deal of rich data. Hermeneutic studies require the researcher to participate collaboratively, which may affect the trustworthiness of the study.

This study was open to all school counselors who work with African American girls. However, the study only drew the interest of African American female school counselors, thus revealing two additional limitations related to race and gender. Because the only participants were African American, this study was limited in that it does not encapsulate the lived experience of school counselors from other racial and cultural backgrounds. Because of this, the experiences of the participants may not speak to school counselors of other racial demographics. Additionally, all respondents were female. This limited a view from the male perspective.

Recommendations

Based on the strengths and limitations revealed in this study, there are future research recommendations and general recommendations for school counselors. Recommendations are presented below based on the study findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study provided much-needed insight into the lived experiences of school counselors encountering RA in African American girls. However, there are still many areas that need to be addressed in future research. More research is needed on addressing RA in Black girls from the school counselor's perspective. Future research should continue to focus on gathering rich descriptions to minimize gaps in the literature on the topic of RA. Future research is needed in the following areas:

1. Examine specific cultural values within the African American community that may influence the use of RA. This research recommendation aims to explore whether cultural factors contribute to RA, and whether members of the African American community perceive these interactions similarly to the established definition of RA. The findings of this study could serve as a guide for future research examining cultural influences associated with RA.
2. Further exploration into how African American girls are perceived in instances of RA is warranted due to ongoing disproportions in the way they are punished compared to their peers from other racial and cultural backgrounds.

3. Future qualitative research involving more school counseling professionals would be helpful to further explore how cultural and social aspects affect AA girls' use of RA, as qualitative research provides unique and detailed perspectives from the participant population.
4. This study was limited to the unique perspectives of eight African American females. For future research on this topic, a larger sample of school counselors from various racial, cultural, and gender backgrounds would be beneficial. This approach would help encapsulate a wider range of insights from school counselors.
5. Research that explores the cultural preparedness of school staff in addressing RA is necessary due to ongoing concerns that school staff often lack cultural awareness in these instances.

General Recommendations for School Counselors

School counselors must understand the barriers associated with recognizing and addressing instances of RA in African American girls. General recommendations to help bridge the gap are as follows:

1. Build cohesive and trusting relationships with African American girls, considering their perspectives on how they are perceived by others. This recommendation aims to foster a level of trust that will allow AA girls to be more open to sharing their experiences of RA and openly expressing their feelings.

2. Be prepared and willing to advocate on behalf of this population of students, as student advocacy is a key role for school counselors. Advocating on behalf of the students provides a voice to the sometimes voiceless. When students recognize school counselors as individuals who are willing to support them, they are more likely to confide in them.
3. Communicate with administrators and school staff as a valuable stakeholder within your school setting. This recommendation assists others in the school in better understanding the role of school counselors and how we can support all stakeholders in promoting the success of students.
4. Educate and train teachers, staff, administrators, and community members on RA and factors associated with the phenomenon because many school staff are unaware of RA's existence and its effects. Providing this education will enable them to recognize and address instances of RA more effectively.
5. Advocate for updates to anti-bullying policies to include terminology and examples related to RA. Work with local and state officials to raise awareness about this form of bullying, ensuring they recognize the signs and understand how to effectively address it.

Implications for Social Change

Social change agents are those who push the envelope on hard issues (Heucher et al., 2024). Issues of racism, classism, social issues, economic barriers, and historical

barriers need to be addressed for positive change to take place (Lee, 1998). The key concept to being a social change agent is empowerment. The results from the current research provide several implications for school counselors as well as others who have a part in helping to shape and mold the futures of school-age African American girls. One major factor is to provide more education for the students on the topic of RA along with ways to seek assistance. In addition, clarifying RA in comparison to other forms of aggression to school staff is also vital. (Tao et al., 2021; Waasdorp et al., 2022; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2020). Additionally, creating and providing more mentorship opportunities that focus on student empowerment and prosocial behaviors to help follow and support these students through various stages of life as well as challenge the multicultural awareness of school faculty and staff in being fairer and more equitable in serving students. The focal point of this study was school counselors who serve African American girls. school counselors serve. The study also included a participant demographic consisting of only African American school counselors. However, despite these factors, the information derived from the study could also be extended to other school counselors and educators as a model for best practices.

This study has increased my level of competence in how to further address this phenomenon in my capacity as a school counselor. I would like to figure out a way to help minimize or erase the negative stigma that exists around the way African American girls conduct themselves. Without more research on this topic, this issue will likely continue to be an ongoing obstacle in schools and communities across our nation. Those in the field of school counseling and education are held to a higher standard of being a

voice for the sometimes voiceless. As counseling professionals, we are to act as social justice advocates. It is important, however, to be properly trained to be successful in this role. Being an advocate is a role that requires a great deal of leadership and commitment, but it is necessary to drive society forward. These measures and efforts help to bridge the current gaps that exist so that future studies can be conducted to help fuse the gap closed.

Conclusion

The present research was designed to understand the lived experiences of school counselors in relation to addressing RA in African American girls. The rich and deep depictions of each counselor's personal accounts of addressing this phenomenon revealed that African American girls who exhibit signs of RA, as either victim or perpetrator, are viewed and treated in much less favorable ways than their peers of other races. Future research that focuses on training school staff about cultural competence and sensitivity, and revising current anti-bullying policies to reflect terminology and examples of RA may provide additional benefits to African American girls. Additionally, further training should be implemented in recognizing this type of behavior, training on cultural competence and sensitivity, and revisions in current anti-bullying policies should be made to reflect terminology and examples of RA.

Literature continues to support the notion that healthy communication builds healthy relationships (DeNetto et al., 2021; Aizpitarte, 2017, Espelage et al., 2018). The current research supported this notion by revealing when participants inserted themselves into the social spaces of these students, bonds were formed, and trust was established. Subsequently, participants expressed that this also led to the students being more open to

being educated on and learning techniques that influenced more prosocial behaviors. Continuing to provide opportunities for school counselors to present themselves in student-centered spaces is vital.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, social learning theory, and relational cultural theory were used in combination for this study approach. The interpretation of the findings of this study suggests that African American girls are often viewed as the culprits in relationally aggressive situations and often receive more harsh punishment than their counterparts (Voulgaridou et al., 2023). Outcomes also suggest that more information is needed regarding the foundational context of why these girls express themselves in this manner and how school counselors, teachers, and administrators can help shift the current trajectory to one that is more supportive and empowering for African American girls.

School counselors are tasked with providing equitable counseling services to support the academic, social, and career development of all students. There is also a need to educate staff on the topic of RA and how to properly recognize and address these occurrences. Continued research is vital to help improve preventative services as well as to provide better advocacy and support efforts for African American girls experiencing RA.

The purpose of this chapter was to explain this study's findings based upon the existing scholarly literature on school counselors' experiences in addressing RA in African American girls. An analysis and interpretation of the findings based on existing literature, phenomenological framework, and participant accounts was provided. Key

limitations and future recommendations were added based on these results and analyses. Lastly, a summarization of the implications for social change was provided based on the findings in this research study.

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Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Information

Please respond to the following questions by selecting the answer that best reflects your response for each item.

Years of School Counseling Experience

0-3 4-7 8-11 12-15 15 or more

Grade Levels You Have Served as a Counselor (circle all that apply)

Elementary Middle High Other _____

Education

Master's degree Specialist degree Doctorate degree Other _____

Did You Graduate from a CACREP Accredited Program?

Yes No Not Sure

Age

20-29 30-39 40-49 50 and over

Gender

Male Female

Race/Ethnicity

Asian American Black/African American Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
Hispanic/Latino Mixed Race Native American White/Caucasian
Other: _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Please describe your experience in addressing incidences of RA among African American girls as either victims, perpetrators, or bystanders.
    Supporting Questions: What happened?; How did you feel?; What did you do?

2. What type of education have you received about RA specifically, or how have you learned about this type of bullying?

3. How does your experience in addressing RA with African American female students differ from you addressing it with other students?

4. How do you typically recognize a girl who is being victimized by peers?
    Supporting Questions: What are the barriers to recognizing victims of RA?

5. What are the current anti-bullying policies in your school?
    Supporting Questions: Do you feel they are inclusive of relationally aggressive behaviors? How effective do you believe they are? What could be added or revised to make them more effective? In what way do they fit with your natural response style?

6. How do you respond to bullying situations with girls? What do you feel is most/least helpful or effective?

7. What factors do you believe play a role in whether victims choose to report or not report bullying to school authorities?

8. In your school, what is your identified role in addressing RA?
    Supporting Questions: In what ways are you validated in this role?; Who assigned you this role?; What ways could your role be enhanced, if any?

9. How seriously do you believe your colleagues consider RA to be?

10. Why do you believe bullying occurs among adolescent girls?
    Supporting Questions: What do you think it is like for girls to be bullied by their peers?
    In what ways is RA among African American girls addressed differently than RA amongst girls of other racial backgrounds?

11. What effects do you think bullying and RA has on the victims?

12. Have you ever been bullied? If so, what was that experience like for you, how do you believe it affected you, and how do you believe it impacts how you respond to bullying

situations as an adult? If not, how do you believe that might impact how you respond to bullying situations as an adult?

13. In what ways do you believe you have ever been directly affected by someone using RA?

14. How has your personal experience with RA affected the way you address the occurrence of RA with your students?

15. How do you think African American girls who encounter RA experience you as a counselor?

Supporting Questions: How do you think they experience your principals? Do you feel there is a difference in the way AA girls experience you versus girls of other races? If yes, please share what those differences are and how these differences affect AA students.