



Meaning making of Life after Childhood Trauma in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

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ABSTRACT

Childhood trauma can have lasting impacts on emotional and existential well-being (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Nevertheless, survivors often show high levels of psychological adaptability through meaning-making mechanisms. This qualitative phenomenological research study aimed to explore the experiences of Pakistani adults with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to childhood trauma in terms of meaning-making as a coping and recovery mechanism. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six adult participants with PTSD due to childhood trauma ($n = 6$). Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Results indicated that the experiences of participants were categorized into three main themes: perspective shifts, identity reconstruction, and resilience as a coping mechanism. Participants indicated that making meaning from experiences of trauma was a continuous process of reconstructing a life story with trauma experiences included, which helped them cope with emotions, practice self-compassion, and enhance resilience. This research study indicates the need for culture-based interventions for individuals with PTSD, focusing on reconstructing a life story, coping with experiences, and making meaning as a way of coping with trauma experiences.

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1. Introduction

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014, trauma can be defined as a psychologically harmful event that can affect a person's sense of self, safety, and emotional well-being. Traumatic experiences in early life significantly affect personality development, emotional control, and psychological well-being. Traumatic experiences in early life can affect a person's core beliefs about safety, trust, and self-regulation (Lanius, Terrou, & McKinnon, 2020). Trauma is a global phenomenon, and different social contexts affect individuals' psychological experiences and adaptive strategies. In collectivistic cultures like Pakistan, cultural values related to family relationships, spirituality, and emotions are key factors in understanding and processing trauma. The psychological effects of trauma on children have been extensively studied; however, the ways in which survivors make sense of their experiences have not yet been adequately examined. The cognitive and emotional processes involved in the integration of disturbing experiences into the total existence of individuals is referred to as "Meaning Making" (Park, 2022). In order to understand the healing and resilience process following trauma, it is essential to comprehend the processes involved in individuals' understanding of their lives and their experiences. The vast majority of individuals have, at some

point in their lives, undergone stressful situations that have left them traumatized. The World Mental Health Survey Consortium interviewed more than 69,000 adults from 24 countries and asked them about their mental health. They found out that "70% of adults worldwide have experienced at least one stressful or traumatic event in their lives." Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are "a series of experiences that may be stressful and occur before the individual is 18 years old." These experiences often disrupt children's developmental stages and compromise the nurturing bond between them and their care takers.

Examples of ACEs include neglect, divorce, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, as well as the loss of a parent. However, reactions to traumatic experiences vary depending on the stage of development; for example, young children may display aggressive and destructive behaviors or draw what happened during the traumatic event (Dyregrov & Yule, 2006). As a result, trauma has long-term impacts on families and communities in addition to the person (Mash & Barkley, 2002). Over time, unresolved trauma can lead to a number of psychological and emotional problems, such as anxiety, depression, anger, survivor's guilt, dissociation, anhedonia, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). However, prolonged exposure may diminish self-regulation and lead to the development of maladaptive coping strategies. Even so, resilience is seen as an important part of the rehabilitation process. A number of things have been found to help people be more resilient, such as being optimistic, being able to change their minds, being able to cope with stress, having social support, being physically healthy, and having a strong sense of values or purpose. These components not only protect against the negative effects of trauma but also improve the ability to adapt and rebuild.

1.2. Problem Statement

One of the core aspects of recovery is the concept of meaning-making, which is defined as the cognitive and emotional process of integrating experiences into one's life narrative (Zittoun & Brinkmann, 2012). After trauma, meaning-making helps the individual place their experiences in the context of their life narrative and identity (Park, 2022). This process, although very important for healing and development, is emotionally taxing and requires external support. For children who have been exposed to extreme trauma, the coping mechanisms that have been developed for short-term protection have been shown to hinder long-term emotional regulation and prevent them from seeking proper help. Ultimately, meaning-making enables a transformation of identity from a victim-based perspective to one that is survivor-based. This enables a person to regain a sense of agency, redefine their life story, and find purpose in their experiences. By embracing this, survivors are not only able to heal but also to grow and make a difference in their communities.

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To explore meaning-making in individuals with PTSD who have experienced any childhood trauma.
2. To identify the resilience factors and coping strategies that facilitate meaning-making in this population.

1.4. Research Questions

1. How do individuals with PTSD interpret and construct meaning in their lives following childhood trauma?
2. What are the most effective coping strategies and resilience factors that facilitate meaning-making in individuals with PTSD resulting from childhood trauma?

2. Literature Review

Previous researches have consistently highlighted meaning-making as a center for psychological processes in trauma recovery. Rather than simply reducing distress, meaning-making enables individuals to reinterpret their traumatic experiences within a broader life narrative and restore a sense of coherence and purpose (Park, 2022). Research on trauma survivors has shown that people often find new meaning through cognitive reframing, social support, and spiritual introspection. Research has demonstrated that meaning-making is an essential component of resilience. Olstad et al. (2024) in a study showed that adolescents who experienced developmental trauma often found meaning in their lives through internal values, a sense of belonging, and involvement in meaningful activities. Similarly, Hakkim and Deb (2021) in their study found that people who faced early adversity showed greater resilience when they reflected on those experiences and found new meanings in them. Another important aspect in

creating meaning is the rebuilding of one's identity. Trauma can affect an individual's perception of self, causing them to be confused about their identities. In a study by Van der Westhuizen, Walker-Williams and Fouché (2023), the researchers discovered that for individuals with a history of childhood sexual abuse, rebuilding their identities is done through storytelling and post-traumatic growth. In another study by Van der Westhuizen, Walker-Williams and Fouché (2023), through a meta-analysis of the literature, it was discovered that there is a need to incorporate trauma, empowerment, and integration in creating a cohesive self-narrative. It appeared that there were cultural and contextual factors that impacted the way an individual understood things. Wambua, Kilian and Chiliza (2025) showed that individuals with Adverse Childhood Experiences relied on interactions with others and spirituality to redefine their traumatic experiences and build resilience. Despite these findings, there are no studies done on meaning-making for individuals with PTSD, especially considering the context of Asian cultures. Most of the studies done so far have been conducted on Western cultures, and there is a lack of understanding regarding the role of cultural concepts, religious values, and social norms in the meaning-making process for trauma survivors in countries such as Pakistan.

3. Theoretical framework

This study utilises an integrative theoretical framework that combines three theories i.e., Meaning-Making Theory, Constructivist Self-Development Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory to investigate how individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) interpret and reconstruct their childhood trauma experiences. This process helps individuals view their traumatic event in a different light, such as a chance to learn, become strong, or even grow. This makes individuals mentally strong and gives them a reason to live. In relation to traumatic experiences in childhood, meaning-making is of crucial importance as a means by which trauma survivors recontextualize their experiences of trauma and re-construct their self-identity. The Constructivist Self-Development Theory (CSDT) was developed by McCann and Pearlman (2015) and offers a theory that enables the description and explanation of the effects of experiences of trauma on the cognitive schemes of the individual and the construction of the self-identity.

According to the Constructivist Self-Development Theory, experiences of trauma have a great influence on the cognitive schemes of the individual, such as the need for safety, trust, control, self-esteem, and the ability to relate with others. This makes trauma survivors feel guilty, limits their capacity to build and maintain relationships, and destroys their self-identity, especially in relation to childhood trauma. It is also proposed by CSDT that people change their perspectives of self and their environment constantly in response to their experiences. People can change their flawed schemas gradually by using a reflective technique, such as meaning production, to help them become mentally strong and aware, and to help them become stronger by placing their past experiences in a different context. Apart from cognitive reconstruction, coping, and resilience are also vital in helping individuals overcome traumatic experiences. In 1986, Bandura was the first to conceptualize the idea of Social Cognitive Theory. Benight and Bandura used it to assist individuals in recovery from traumatic experiences in 2004. The theory illustrates the importance of developing self-confidence in one's problem-solving skills. Having self-efficacy means that you believe in your capacity to deal with problems and take charge of your life. In the context of trauma, high levels of coping self-efficacy are related to better psychological outcomes, effective coping, and better emotional processing. Survivors who believe in their capacity to cope with traumatic stress are likely to exhibit self-improvement, reinterpretation, and participate in effective meaning-making activities.

These theoretical perspectives provide a complete framework for understanding the process of traumatic experience reconstruction and interpretation. Meaning-Making Theory helps to understand the cognitive and existential processes survivors use to re-construct meaning in their life stories. Constructivist Self-Development Theory focuses on the opportunities for rehabilitation and self-development of the individual. It also focuses on the impact of trauma on individuals' self-beliefs. Social Cognitive Theory is another theory that extends the principles of the previous theories. These theories guide these researches of how adults with post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from childhood trauma reconstruct their identity, make sense of past experiences, and utilize coping skills that promote psychological healing. These concepts provide a synthesis that informs this research on the complex interrelationship of trauma, identity, resilience, and meaning-making for survivors.

4. Method

A qualitative phenomenological research methodology was used in the study to explore the phenomenon of meaning-making in adults with PTSD caused by childhood trauma. The transcendental phenomenological approach was used in this study because it can help in understanding the essence of the experiences of the participants, and the researcher's biases are eliminated in the process. Data saturation was achieved in this study as no new themes or individual views emerged in the final interviews conducted with the participants. Due to the nature of the phenomenological research methodology, a sample size of six individuals was considered sufficient for this study. As the interviews were conducted in a mix of Urdu and English, the statements of the participants were transcribed in their original form, i.e., in Urdu and English. In case of texts in Urdu, translation was done for the purpose of interpretation, keeping in mind the context in which the statements were made by the participants, so that the actual meanings are preserved.

4.1. Research Design

Transcendental phenomenological method was used. This method was based on Moustakas (1994). This method is used to describe and understand the essence of participants' experiences while bracketing the preconceptions of the researchers.

4.2. Data Collection Tool

In this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect the required data. This method was useful for participants to be able to share their thoughts and experiences in a safe and structured manner. Their non-verbal cues also added to the research.

4.3. Sample and Sampling Strategy

Six participants were selected through purposive sampling, chosen for their experience of childhood trauma and subsequent Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD diagnosis was formally established by licensed mental health professionals, as reported by participants during recruitment. Participants included 5 women and 1 man, aged 22 and above ($n = 6$, PTSD-diagnosed adults). The sociodemographic characteristics are shown below:

Table 1

Participant	Age	Gender	Trauma Type	Family System	Birth Order
1	23	Female	Physical abuse	Joint	3rd
2	28	Male	Emotional neglect	Nuclear	Only child
3	28	Female	Sexual abuse	Nuclear	1st
4	24	Female	Emotional and second-hand trauma	Nuclear	2nd
5	26	Female	Emotional abuse and neglect	Nuclear	3rd
6	25	Female	Emotional and physical abuse	Nuclear	1st

4.4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The eligibility for participants comprised that they must be adults, 22 years of age or older, must have experienced emotional, physical, or sexual trauma before the age of 18, and must have a formal diagnosis of PTSD from a licensed mental health professional. Exclusion criteria for participants included individuals with severe mental health issues, medical conditions, substance abuse, and that currently undergoing therapy, as all these factors could impact participants' expression of narrative.

4.5. Procedure

The Institutional Ethics Review Committee of Kinnaird College for Women gave the study its ethical approval. Participants were given complete information about the objectives of this study, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw the study at any time without any consequences. All participants were asked to sign consent form before proceeding with the interviews. Clinical psychologists having expertise in trauma focused therapy were approached in order to recruit participants. Before the participants signed the consent form, information about the purpose and methodology of the study was provided to them. Interviews were conducted in a way that emphasized building rapport and creating emotional safety. Before obtaining all the data, a pilot interview was conducted to make the interview guide better and clearer.

4.6. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological method (1994). Analysis involved multiple stages, including bracketing researcher assumptions, identifying significant statements, clustering these statements into themes, and conducting imaginative variation to examine structural meanings. Textural and structural descriptions were subsequently integrated to describe the essence of individuals' meaning-making experiences subsequent to childhood trauma. This method helped uncover similar themes in incidents while still respecting each person's point of view. The interviews were conducted in both Urdu and English, as the interviewees naturally used both languages during the discussions. Bilingualism is a frequently used in daily conversation in Pakistan, as people go back and forth between multiple languages, such as, Urdu and English. After the interviewees signed consent, all interviews were recorded and later transcribed word to word. In the transcription phase, the bilingual responses of the interviewees were translated into English to make data analysis and reporting clear and consistent. The translation of bilingual responses was done to maintain originality in the data and to make it easier for the academic audience to comprehend the data.

4.7. Results

The study examined people diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder and their interpretation and construction of meaning following childhood trauma. The findings from the interviews revealed four primary themes and subthemes, indicating how the participants interpreted their experiences, managed them, and evolved as a result.

Theme 1: Perspective Shift

The first theme was Perspective Shift. It talks about how participants changed their thought patterns following their past trauma, which helped them develop and heal. There are four subthemes in this theme: Gaining Agency, Growth Through Adversity, Meaning in Healing, and Recontextualizing past

- **Gaining Agency:** Participants talked about how they went from feeling powerless to realising their own power.

"Now it's up to you to make these changes work for you." (P1)

"You are stronger than your past, and you have the power to heal yourself." (P2)

"Most importantly, you start to see your own strengths and understand that you have yourself in the end." I am my own best friend. (P4)

- **Growth Through Adversity and Meaning in Healing:** Participants contemplated the conversion of suffering into resilience and significance.

"Be there for others, but don't forget about yourself." Helping others might make you happy, but you shouldn't forget about yourself. (P1)

"If I could speak to my childhood self, I would tell her that none of this was her fault. I would tell her that she is strong and that she will eventually overcome it. I would also tell her that it is okay to feel pain, to cry, to feel angry, or to be afraid."

"I believe that trauma is only one part of your life. Whether you make it your identity or not is entirely in your hands." (P5)

"As they say, the evening of sorrow may be long, but it is still just an evening. One day you will learn how to control this fear." (P6)

Theme 2: Reclaiming Identity

This theme shows how participants experience a hard time and making progress in putting together a clear picture of who they are and regain their identity and sense of self. There are subthemes including Social Identity Crisis, Spiritual Crisis, and Self-Compassion.

- **Social Identity Crisis:** Participants described difficulties with self-concept and insecurity.

"I stopped people-pleasing at one point, but the fear of rejection and abandonment was still there. That fear often made me go back to people-pleasing so that others would remain happy with me." (P2)

- **Spiritual Crisis:** Participants described shifting spiritual beliefs that supported meaning-making.

"In the beginning, I did not take religion seriously. At one point, I even considered converting and started looking into other religions because I kept asking why all of this was happening to me. Later, when I gained some understanding, I realized that I had been mistaken. That was when I began learning more about Islam. Now whenever I feel low, I pray or turn to my faith." (P4)

"When things get really tough, I turn to Allah for peace." I say prayers, especially ones that ask for healing and help with worry, like "Hasbunallahu wa ni'mal wakeel." (P2)

- **Self-Compassion:** Participants stressed the importance of learning to love and accept themselves.

"It is important to know that both pain and growth are very complicated things." (P2)

"I learned to be kinder to myself and to let go of things I couldn't control." I also learnt how important it is to take care of myself and put my mental and emotional health first. (P3)

Theme 3: Recontextualization of the Environment

This theme encompasses participants' perceptions of their environment and interpersonal connections, incorporating detachment and disconnection as mechanisms of coping.

- **Dissociation and Disconnection:** Participants reported emotional and social detachment as a reaction to trauma.

"I learned to be kinder to myself and to let go of things I couldn't change." I also learnt how important it is to take care of myself and put my mental and emotional health first. (P4)

"I try to get to know people better, but there is always a wall." Many of my friends have thought I was emotionally distant, which has led to misunderstandings. (P2)

Theme 4: Resilience and Coping

This theme reflects strategies participants used to withstand adversity and integrate their past into current life.

- **Empathy as a way to deal with things:** Participants said that being empathetic toward others helped them heal.

"One day, you might even be thankful for what you went through because it made you a better person." You also try to help other people. From what I've seen, empathy might be the best characteristic there is. (P4)

"My trauma made me more understanding." When I see someone having a hard time, I think that their tale might be just as traumatic as mine. (P4) • **Growth Mindset and Reconciling Past and Present:** Participants talked about how they used their past trauma to shape their current goals, relationships, and identities.

"I knew I had to do this for both my career and my own growth." I wasn't only thinking about the job or promotion when I made that choice; I was also thinking about how far I'd come in learning to trust myself. (P2)

"Yes, I have grown, but it feels like a back-and-forth journey." When I'm not sure of myself, I think about all the things I've done that I believed were impossible.

That makes me believe my future can still be good because it is in my hands.” (P4)
“This experience also led me toward personal growth. I now feel more motivated to pursue my interests and goals in life.” (P6)

4.8. Synthesis of Textural and Structural Descriptions

4.8.1. Textural Description

Participants described meaning-making as a gradual and emotionally complex process that unfolded over time. Many participants felt a state of confusion after they experienced childhood trauma, they felt confused, upset, and that their identity was fading away. By reflecting, processing their emotions, and having social interactions, individuals started to see their painful memories in a new perspective and fit them into the bigger picture of their lives.

4.8.2. Structural Description

There are several processes that are connected to each other in the process of making meaning. These steps involve changing how an individual sees things, rebuilding their sense of self, letting go of their feelings, and becoming more resilient. Participants frequently articulated a transition from feelings of helplessness to an enhanced sense of personal action. Empathy for others, spiritual contemplation, and self-compassion surfaced as essential mechanisms facilitating this development.

4.8.3. Essence

The essence of experience of the participants is that meaning-making is a gradual process that is deeply personal, through which an individual recontextualises the trauma experienced in childhood and develops a new understanding of identity. For the participants, the trauma they experienced initially affected their safety, belonging, and self-esteem. However, through increased self-awareness, individuals are able to reinterpret the traumatic experience and make a new, more holistic understanding of the experience. While meaning-making was a series of events of understanding, it was a dynamic and constantly changing process influenced by perspective, identity, emotional detachment, and the development of resilience. Individuals described this process of accepting their sadness while simultaneously understanding their unique qualities and potential for improvement. This is often a journey in which people begin to see their trauma as merely a piece of a larger story about their life, rather than the largest piece of who they are.

5. Discussion

The current research investigated how individuals diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder get meaning from childhood trauma and integrate these experiences into their evolving self-concept. The results therefore, reinforce the importance of meaning-making as a dynamic and multidimensional psychological process that enables coping, reconstruction of the self, and the development of resilience. The participants, however, did not report a road to recovery, but rather a process of making sense in which the traumatic events were integrated into the context of larger life stories. One of the key findings of the study was the development of perspective shifts that allowed the participants to see the traumatic events as part of their life story rather than their whole life story. The participants reported their progress towards realization that the trauma was a real event that had helped them gain insight into their experiences rather than an event that had changed their self-esteem forever. This is in line with the trends of the theoretical models of Meaning Making, which focus on cognitive restructuring post-incident (Park, 2022).

Previous research has shown that survivors who go through a reflective reinterpretation of their experiences are likely to adjust psychologically and become emotionally stable (Olstad et al., 2024). In the present study, the perspective transformation was the key that allowed the participants to move from a helpless position to a position of increased personal agency and self-awareness. The results also showed that rebuilding one's identity is a key part of the process of making sense of things. Participants frequently expressed feelings of uncertainty in their self-concept, including feelings of unease, fear of rejection, and self-identity. Such feelings are consistent with research that has found trauma in development compromises core human psychology constructs of safety, trust, and self-esteem (McCann & Pearlman, 2015). Nevertheless, participants in the present study expressed a gradual reconstruction of their identities through self-compassion, mindful coping, and emotional understanding. This process indicates the theoretical perspective that meaning-making involves the rebuilding of human

identity through the integration of traumatic memories into a broader narrative of growth and resilience. Another important conclusion drawn from the study is the role played by spirituality in the entire process of meaning-making. The participants stated their feelings towards religious concepts and practices, as they found emotional consolation and understanding through them. Considering the sociocultural context of the country, i.e., Pakistan, religion may be seen as a way to cope with the problems and challenges one faces in life and to solve moral problems. The participants stated that prayer and religious understanding are comforting during hard times.

This conclusion also fits with previous research suggesting that spirituality may facilitate meaning-making by offering interpretive frameworks for suffering and emotional acceptance (Wambua, Kilian, & Chiliza, 2025). In collectivistic cultures, religious coping may serve as a significant cultural resource for psychological resilience. The research showed that the experience of dissociation and emotional separation was considered to be a coping strategy during the initial phases of trauma processing. The participants expressed their experience of emotional separation or distance in relationships as a defense strategy that was cultivated during their childhood hardships. These coping strategies, although effective in the initial phases, according to the literature on trauma, can affect the emotional well-being of individuals, especially when there is a long experience of dissociation (Schimmenti & Caretti, 2016). Participants' point of view shows that the process of meaning-making allowed for a progressive re-evaluation of the ways in which one coped, identifying them as coping strategies rather than personal weaknesses. Another important theme was related to the role that empathy and growth mindset could play in helping one become more resilient. There was a heightened sense of empathy for the difficulties that others face, with participants even attributing the hardship to their own experiences with adversity.

This finding supports research indicating that trauma survivors may exhibit increased emotional sensitivity and prosocial orientation in the presence of meaning-making processes (Van der Westhuizen, Walker-Williams, & Fouché, 2023). In addition, participants were also able to articulate their growth mindsets, recognizing their own ability to overcome challenges and shape their own future. This also resonates with Bandura's theory of coping self-efficacy, which posits that "individuals who believe in their ability to manage challenging situations are more prone to adopt constructive coping strategies" (Benight & Bandura, 2004). The participants also recognized that "growth and healing are non-linear processes by nature." Even though it did not completely take away their emotional pain, it "helped participants to reinterpret their experiences in ways that allowed for progress." This, again, is a clear understanding of "the understanding that resilience is not defined by the absence of adversity, but by the ability to integrate adversity in a way that makes sense within one's life story." The results indicate that meaning-making is a psychological construct embedded within a culture and is influenced by introspection, interpersonal relationships, and spirituality. This is helpful in understanding how interventions can be designed for trauma survivors.

5.1. Clinical Implications

The results indicate that meaning-making should be a core approach in trauma-focused therapies. Therapies that involve meaning-making, narrative reconstruction, self-compassion, spiritual discovery, and identity integration can be very useful for individuals experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of childhood trauma. However, the effectiveness of meaning-making therapies should be considered in collectivistic cultures, as emotional expression can be affected by culture and context.

5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

The research provides useful information, but it is difficult to generalize it for other situations because of the small number of participants. It is based on specific people who have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and it is difficult to generalize it for other people who have gone through trauma. This research can be taken further by looking at the construct of meaning-making from different cultural backgrounds. It can also be taken further from a longitudinal perspective, looking at what might change over time, and looking at both genders and different kinds of traumas.

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