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# A Qualitative Inquiry into the Treatment Experience of Adolescent Females in a Relationally Based Therapeutic Boarding School

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A Qualitative Inquiry into the Treatment Experience of Adolescent Females  
in a Relationally Based Therapeutic Boarding School

Douglas S. Marchant

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

### A Qualitative Inquiry into the Treatment Experience of Adolescent Females in a Relationally based Therapeutic Boarding School

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Individualism, the assumption that persons are self-contained and primarily act for the sake of the self, is prevalent in American culture and has arguably perpetuated numerous psychological and societal ills. Relationality, the assumption that persons are always and inextricably constituted by relationships, has been posited as a philosophical and practical alternative to individualist culture. Several scholars, both inside and outside of psychology, have developed relational concepts and practices, including some who have elucidated a relational approach to psychotherapy (e.g., Slife and Wiggins, 2009). This study examines the implications and effects of this therapeutic approach, particularly exploring relationality's therapeutic success in countering the implications of individualism. Greenbrier Academy, an adolescent female boarding school located in West Virginia, has adopted relationality as its guiding therapeutic ethic. This study utilized hermeneutically modified grounded-theory methods to inquire into the lived experience of students at Greenbrier Academy. Eight students were interviewed and the researcher recorded observations of daily programing over a six-day period. Results indicated that Greenbrier's students' experienced marked changes in the quality and meaning of their interpersonal relationships. They increasingly cared for and served their relationships, engaged in more intimate relationships with others, approached (rather than retreated from) others' differences, viewed others more holistically, and accepted personal responsibility in relation to their context.

*Key Words:* relationality, relationship, individualism, qualitative methods, grounded-theory methods, hermeneutics, psychotherapy, psychotherapy effectiveness, psychotherapy outcome

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## A Qualitative Inquiry into the Treatment Experience of Adolescent Females in a Relationally Based Therapeutic Boarding School

A client entering psychotherapy can expect to encounter several common practices and conceptions. First, the client will likely be seen in an unfamiliar office, extracted from his or her day-to-day context, absent of family or other meaningful relationships. Second, surmising that the client has come to therapy because of his or her individual unhappiness, the clinician may establish an explicit or implicit treatment goal to increase the client's happiness or well-being. Third, to reach this goal the clinician may first diagnose a responsible internal pathology and then expose the client's pathology to external treatment forces. Finally, progress in treatment will likely be measured by the client's self-report or individual presentation in therapy sessions.

Though adherence to such practices and conceptions may seem commonsensical to many clinicians, they are underlain with what some scholarly observers of psychology have termed a disguised ideology (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). In other words, these practices and conceptions share a hidden, underlying philosophy—the philosophy of individualism (Christopher, 2001; Richardson et al., 1999; Slife, 2004a; Slife & Wiggins, 2009). Individualism elevates the primacy of the individual as the most basic, fundamental unit of human experience (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Richardson et al., 1999; Slife, 2004a; Slife & Richardson, 2008). Psychotherapists assume individualism when they adopt theories that define a specific internal construct as the focal point of treatment (Slife & Wiggins, 2009). For example, a client's mood, cognition, reinforcement history, or unconscious conflicts are commonly defined as self-contained within the client, not as shared or relational experiences. Whether or not they are aware of it, psychotherapists perpetuate individualism when they teach their clients to think of themselves in these individualistic ways.

Where it occurs, this lack of acknowledgment might be due, in part, to the implicit individualistic assumptions that pervade the wider Western culture and political milieu; psychotherapists may simply not even recognize when they are advocating this philosophy. Cultural and political individualism also promotes the unique, self-reliant, and independent nature of the person (Bellah et al., 1985; Richardson et al., 1999; Slife, 2004a; Slife & Richardson, 2008). Richardson et al. (1999) suggest that by adopting cultural individualism “we tacitly view human beings atomistically as discrete centers of experience and action concatenated in various ways into social groups, struggling to reduce inevitable conflicts with others through negotiations and temporary alliances” (p. 71). In other words, from this perspective society is seen as a group of self-contained individuals, attempting to reconcile their individual self-interest.

Cultural and psychological adoption of individualism, much as the adoption of any philosophy of human nature, has its consequences. In this dissertation, I will review evidence that our wide and uncritical adoption of individualism has created a shallow reservoir of meaning and purpose, particularly in the lives of young Americans. Although individualism has clearly spawned important concepts and institutions (e.g., individual human rights), I will review research indicating that this adoption of individualism has also perpetuated some of the very psychological and cultural problems that promoters of individualism have promised it would solve (e.g. depressive and anxiety symptoms, crime rates, teenage suicide, and teenage pregnancy) (Klerman & Weissman, 1989; Lewinsohn, Rohde, Seeley, & Fischer, 1993; Twenge, 2000, 2006).

Responding to these concerns, several professionals have articulated plausible alternatives to the doctrines of individualism (see Christopher, 2001; Fowers, 2005b; Gergen,



2009b; MacMurray, 1961; Richardson et al., 1999; Slife & Wiggins, 2009). The philosopher John MacMurray summarizes an alternative perspective on human nature in defining that “the Self exists only in dynamic relation with the Other” (1961, p. 17). Stated another way, relationships matter most in understanding what it means to be human. From this perspective, our existence is always bound up in relationships; we are social beings always situated within an inextricable context. Each person is more of a nexus of relations than a self-contained being, more concerned with good relationships than the pursuit of individual happiness. Theorists have begun to describe how relational psychotherapy might be practiced to better promote good relationships (i.e., Christopher, 2001; Gergen, 2009b; Richardson et al., 1999; Slife & Wiggins, 2009).

In this dissertation I will clarify what it means to adopt a relational alternative to individualism in psychotherapy practice and explore the results of a qualitative inquiry of a therapeutic program that has formally adopted relationality as a guiding ethic. The purpose of the study described here is to evaluate relational psychotherapy as a counter to the tide of individualism pervading America. After reviewing some of the problems created and perpetuated by the philosophy of individualism, I will clarify how relational philosophy is at least *conceptually* a reasonable counter to individualism. In doing so, the ideas of particular theologians, physicists, and anthropologists will be reviewed, as they, more than psychologists, were arguably the pioneers of relational philosophy.

However, there are a growing number of psychologists proposing theories that assert a relational explanation of human nature (Christopher, 2001; Fowers, 2005b; Richardson et al., 1999; Slife & Wiggins, 2009). Illumination of these theorists’ ideas will serve to clarify how relational psychotherapy can be practiced. Before now, few clinicians have practiced relational

psychotherapy, and to the author's knowledge there has been no study of the applied impact of thoroughgoing relational psychotherapy. However, there is a therapeutic boarding school devoted to the practice of relationality; Greenbrier Academy (GBA), located in West Virginia, intends to be an embodiment of relational values and practices. The qualitative study described here is an inquiry into the impact of this school on its students—specifically investigating whether the relational interventions of the school are countering the doctrines of individualism. Qualitative research methods using a hermeneutically modified grounded theory were used to investigate this matter. After reviewing the study's methodology, this study's results and discussion of these results will be presented. Finally, some limitations of this study and recommendations for future research will be clarified.

## **Literature Review**

### **Implications of Individualism**

Several scholars have argued that the doctrines of individualism have come to dominate American culture (Bellah et al., 1985; Christopher, 2001; Richardson et al., 1999; Twenge, 2006). I will review the research of two of these scholars, Robert Bellah and Jean Twenge, representing respectively qualitative and quantitative methods of studying American individualism.

**Bellah and the culture of individualism.** Bellah et al. (1985) claim that individualism has risen as an almost universal cultural assumption in America. Situating qualitative exploration of twentieth century individualism within a complex historical context, their book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, explains how competing values such as success, freedom, justice, and republican citizenship have set the stage for individualism's growth.

From its early days, some Americans have seen the purpose and goal of the nation as the effort to realize the ancient biblical hope of a just and compassionate society. Others have struggled to shape the spirit of their lives and the laws of the nation in accord with the ideals of republican citizenship and participation. Yet others have promoted dreams of manifest destiny and national glory. And always there have been the proponents, often passionate, of the notion that liberty means the spirit of enterprise and the right to amass wealth and power for oneself (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 28).

Bellah et al. contend that from within this complex ideological interface, individualism has come to lie at the “core of American culture” (p. 142). While their qualitative interviews and observations support the idea that Americans have sustained a diversity of values, these values have drifted further from a collective morality toward individual autonomy. They contend that as a people, Americans have come to defend individual autonomy as the most fundamental right and as the basic reality of human life. As such, modern culture’s individualism posits that “the individual is prior to society, which comes into existence only through the voluntary contract of individuals trying to maximize their own self-interest” (p. 143). Bellah et al. contrasts this modern, and more radical, individualism against Classical Republicanism and Reformation Christianity, fading traditions that placed individual autonomy in the context of moral and religious obligation. While these traditions have placed some emphasis on the individual, the independence of the individual has been tempered by obligations that lie outside the self. In contrast, modern individualism has taken the independent self to its radical limits; the self has become that which is the most fundamental and important in defining human identity.

Bellah et al. (1985) termed this radical definition of the self as the basic unit of human reality *ontological* individualism. Generally, ontology is a philosophical effort to explain the

fundamental nature and relation of beings. An ontological inquiry poses the question: What is real (Viney & King, 2003)? Ontological individualism is based on the premise that the individual person is most real and fundamental in defining human existence. As such, the basic unit of human life is the individual person who “is assumed to exist and have determinate characteristics prior to and independent of his or her social existence” (Richardson et al., 1999). Consequently, families and communities merely become artificial aggregates of self-contained individuals interacting so as to satisfy individual needs or goals. In fact, the research of Bellah and his colleagues (1985) suggests that the acceptance of ontological individualism in America today sustains a society in which calculative, manipulative relations are the norm.

**Twenge and individualist self-esteem.** Bellah et al. are not alone in documenting the rise of individualism and its repercussions in America. In her book, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, Twenge (2006) chronicles the rapid growth of a social movement aimed to promote individual self-focus, namely self-esteem, among America's young around the 1980s. Popular media, families, and schools all actively pursued improving children's self-esteem through television programs, books, coloring books, and educational programs. As part of one educational program, teachers are told to discourage children from saying things like “I'm good at math,” or “I'm a good basketball player,” because this makes self-esteem contingent on performance. Instead, “we want to anchor self-esteem firmly to the child...so that no matter what the performance might be, the self-esteem remains high” (Payne & Rolhing, 1994, p. 5). In other words, this program suggests teachers promote an exclusive value on the self, absent of any contextual diversion—a radically individualistic position.

Professional literature has supported, even heralded the promotion of self-esteem through programs like this. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes the importance of children's self-esteem, using this term eight times in the first seven pages of its *Guide to Parenting Children* (Shelov, 1998), not counting the guide's use of synonyms like *confidence*, *self-respect*, and *belief in oneself*. In addition, Hewitt (1998) found that the number of psychology and educational journal articles devoted to self-esteem doubled between the 1970s and 1980s. Twenge (2006) argues that the vast majority of professionals uncritically advocate for the promotion of self-esteem, not questioning whether this is a worthwhile goal. Perhaps our culture is so firmly grounded in individualism that self-esteem is merely assumed to be of value.

To explore the impact of professional and cultural promotion of self-esteem in America, Twenge and her colleagues have conducted a series of quantitative studies (see Twenge & Campbell, 2001; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010; Twenge, Gentile et al., 2010; Twenge & Im, 2007; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman 2008; Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004) using a variation on traditional meta-analysis methodology. In each study researchers combed several decades of published research, selecting studies that include the measurement of a specific psychological construct (e.g. narcissism) using a common quantitative measure. Calling their methodology cross-temporal meta-analysis, Twenge and her colleagues compare the mean scores from each study's sample at a given age (e.g., children 9-12). The goal of this research is to detect generational or across time differences on various self-reported psychological constructs. While her research has been thoughtfully critiqued (see Arnett, 2008; Donnellan & Trzesniewski, 2009), many of her findings and their implications provide a striking illumination of individualism in present day America.

In one analysis, Twenge and Campbell (2001) compared decades of published studies that utilized the most widely administered quantitative self-esteem measures. Their meta-analysis incorporated over 100,000 surveys of self-esteem between the 1960s and 1990s. The purpose of this meta-analysis was to explore self-reported self-esteem trends across time. As the researchers had hypothesized, self-reported levels of self-esteem increased over this span of time. For instance, the average score for children, ages 9-13, measured in the mid-1990s was 73% higher on the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory than for children in 1979. The average score for a college age male in the mid-1990s was 86% higher on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale than in 1968; the average score for college age women increased 71% during this period. The authors suggest that the self-esteem movement in combination with other increasingly individualistic cultural factors likely have contributed to the significant increase in self-reported self-esteem in the youth studied. In other words, families, schools, and society have successfully convinced the younger generations to 'Believe in yourself' and that 'You must love yourself before you can love someone else.'

Twenge et al. (2008) employed a similar cross-temporal meta-analysis to examine changes in self-reported narcissism. They found that the average student scored 67% higher in 2006 than in 1987 on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). Narcissism can be described as an exaggerated view of one's self-importance, often accompanied by exploiting others for one's self-benefit (Twenge, 2006). Few would celebrate our increasing narcissism scores like we might celebrate the improving self-esteem evidenced in Twenge and Campbell's (2001) meta-analysis. As a culture, we disdain narcissism in contrast to our general embrace of self-esteem, even though these two terms are sometimes difficult to distinguish. In fact, some items on the NPI (e.g. "I think I am a special person") could just as easily be found on a self-esteem

questionnaire. Self-reported increases on both narcissism and self-esteem may reflect our increasing cultural self-focus.

Scholarly research of other generational shifts support the claim that American youth are becoming increasingly individualistic. Twenge and her colleagues have found recent generations to be less concerned with social acceptance (Twenge & Im, 2007), more likely to blame others for controlling their lives (Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004), and more devoted to personal status and money while devaluing work (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007; Twenge et al., 2010). Other researchers have also found evidence that America is becoming more self-focused. Putnam (2000) has documented how memberships in community groups have declined by more than twenty percent since the 1970s. Additionally he has documented how various other kinds of social interactions have decreased, reporting that we are less likely to invite friends over for dinner or even visit our neighbors compared to former generations. Putnam calls this trend *civic disengagement* and concludes that this is linked to generational shifts. In sum, these quantitative findings lend support to the conclusions made by Bellah et al. (1985) in their qualitative investigation of America's individualism: more and more, Americans seem to live for themselves, adopting a 'taking care of me' philosophy.

Twenge (2006) argues that today's youth and young adults do not have to defend their self-focus because they were born into a world that already championed the individual. This philosophy has become unquestioned reality, or as Twenge (2006) puts it "the culture of the self is our hometown" (p. 49). She also comments that this generation's "focus on the needs of the individual is not necessarily self absorbed or isolationist; instead it's a way of moving through the world beholden to few social rules and with the unshakable belief that you're important... We simply take it for granted that we should all feel good about ourselves, we are all special, and we

all deserve to follow our dreams. [We are] straightforward and un-apologetic about our self-focus.” (p. 49).

Yet this self-focus may have ironic repercussions—several scholars (see Bellah et al., 1985; Richardson et al., 1999; Twenge, 2006) have argued that the rising individualism of the late twentieth century may not promote psychological health. Instead, as Twenge (2006) suggests, it may result in an empty reservoir of self-confidence and entitlement. The express goal of the self-esteem movement is to improve these adolescents’ mental health by means of improving their perception of themselves. If success is measured by increasing these youths’ self-focus, perhaps the movement has been successful. However, the movement has failed to improve many of the very psychological symptoms it has expressly targeted (e.g. depression, suicide, and criminal behavior). As self-reported self-esteem indices have increased, so have many harmful behaviors and psychological symptoms including depression, anxiety, crime, teen suicide, teen pregnancy, and cynicism (Klerman & Weissman, 1989; Lewinsohn et al., 1993; Twenge, 2000; Twenge 2006).

Some have argued that America’s mental health may not be declining, only that today’s improved reporting and access to treatment have skewed these statistics (Lewinsohn et al., 1993). Others have countered that even the most conservative estimates show obvious increases in symptoms that are commonly viewed as problematic (Klerman & Weissman, 1989; Twenge, 2006). In fact, Twenge, Campbell, et al. (2010) utilized cross-temporal meta-analysis methods to find generational increases in psychological symptoms among American college students between 1938 and 2007 on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and MMPI-2 for high school students between 1951 and 2002 on the MMPI-A. The current generation of young people scores about a standard deviation higher on the MMPI’s clinical



scales, including Psychopathic Deviation, Paranoia, Hypomania, and Depression scales. Five times as many people today score above commonly used cutoffs for pathology on the MMPI. These researchers suggest that generational trends on the MMPI support that there has been an actual increase of mental health symptoms. They claim that their findings suggest “cultural shifts toward extrinsic goals, such as materialism and status and away from intrinsic goals, such as community, meaning in life, and affiliation” (p. 145). Because many of these shifts parallel the growth of individualism, it seems problematic to attempt to treat them with therapeutic strategies based on this ideology. Yet, as we will see, this seems to be exactly what is happening.

### **Individualism in Psychotherapy**

Some scholars argue that psychotherapy’s uncritical reflection of individualist culture has likely debilitated its ability to counter the dangers and problems of American individualist culture (Richardson et al., 1999; Twenge, 2006). As I will show, many of today’s most popular psychological theories subscribe to individualism in theory and practice. Evidence of individualism in these psychological theories can be found in their subscription to three major features of individualism: hedonism, reductionism, and value-freedom.

**The assumption of hedonism.** Hedonism is the assumption that all living things seek to maximize pleasure while avoiding pain or suffering (Slife, 2004b). This is similar to the related assumption of psychological egoism—that human beings are constituted to only act in a manner that maximize benefits for the self (Gantt & Burton, in press). As such, humans are often seen as self-preserving, self-protecting, and self-enhancing. Individuals are not concerned for the well-being of others. Others are instruments to one’s individual benefit.

The wide acceptance of individualism in psychological theory and therapy includes the adoption of hedonism and egoism among many of the discipline’s most prominent theorists. For

example, B. F. Skinner's (1953) principles of operant conditioning are premised on the assumption that living creatures are perpetually maximizing individual pleasure and minimizing pain—behavior that is rewarded is reinforced, whereas behavior that is punished is weakened. Even so, behaviorists do not have a monopoly on hedonism in psychotherapy. Cognitive therapists are also concerned with client's obtaining self-benefit. Beck and Weshaar (2005) explain, "cognitive therapy initially addresses symptom relief, but its ultimate goals are to remove systematic biases in thinking and modify the core beliefs that predispose the person to future distress" (pp. 275-276). Consistent with the hedonistic goal to avoid pain, the ultimate goal of modifying cognition is to ameliorate individual distress, not to generate meaning or promote good relationships.

Humanist and psychodynamic theorists' claims are also grounded in hedonism and egoism, despite their strong rejection of behavioral and cognitive rationales. Prominent humanist Carl Rogers seemed to posit a version of egoism, provided that egoism is defined broadly as a proclivity to seek for the well being of the self. Among his 19 basic propositions of human personality and behavior, Rogers (1951) included: "The organism has one basic tendency and striving—to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing organism" (p. 487) and, "Behavior is basically the goal-directed attempt of the organism to satisfy its needs as experienced, in the field as perceived" (p. 491). Though Rogers is not wedded to the notion of pleasure being synonymous with self-actualization, his theory maintains a generally egoistic position because the focus remains on self-interest and self-fulfillment. Rogers characterizes a basic and universal egoistic tendency, and is one of many humanists (see also Maslow, 1970; Goldstein, 1939/1995) who characterize living organisms as ultimately striving to enhance and benefit the self. Psychodynamic theorists are arguably more explicitly hedonistic than are

humanists, traditionally positing pleasure as a basic human drive. The father of psychodynamic therapy, Sigmund Freud (1920/1957) conceptualized the pleasure-seeking id as the most instinctual of three conflicting structures of the mind. The ego and superego are said to temper the id's pursuit of individualist pleasure against social and moral restraints. However, Luborsky, O'Reilly-Landry, and Arlow (2008) explain how psychoanalytic theory even characterizes these ego drives as self-serving in that they seek "to preserve the existence of the individual by curbing the biological [id] drives, when necessary" (p. 25).

**The assumption of reductionism.** Like hedonism and egoism, reductionism is readily evident in and serves to further individualize psychotherapy today. Reductionism is the notion that some complex phenomenon, such as human experience, is really just an instance or manifestation of a simpler phenomenon (Griffin, 2000). Reductionism in psychotherapy may oversimplify and impoverish the rich context of human experience, by subdividing this experience into self-contained, individual parts (Slife, 1993).

By isolating cognitive processes as having primary significance in treatment, cognitive therapists join with other individualistic approaches to psychotherapy in assuming reductionism. Even though cognitive therapists emphasize the importance of developing a therapeutic relationship (Beck & Weishaar, 2005), the path toward change for clients is narrowly reduced to modifying internalized cognitive processes (Bishop, 2005). Beck and Weishaar (2005) noted that "cognitive therapy emphasizes the primacy of cognition in promoting and maintaining therapeutic change" (p. 276). Fundamentally, change does not come through the therapeutic relationship or any other contextual factors; change is only achieved through modifying self-contained cognitions. Bishop (2005) further explains how cognitive psychologists employ an information-processing model in reducing contextual understanding of clients.

Analyses of human behavior are carried out totally in individualistic terms, emphasizing how various cognitive mechanisms process information. This approach seemingly allows cognitive psychologists to study individuals in a somewhat controlled and isolated fashion. Unfortunately wider social influences on the self are left out of the picture except to the extent they provide external information input. (p. 163)

Ultimately, cognitive-behavioral therapists assume that human experience, including change in psychotherapy, can be simplified to self-contained, individual cognitive processes.

Similarly, behavioral therapists reduce change processes to narrowly defined principles of reinforcement. Wilson (2008) described that behavioral treatment “requires a prior analysis of the problem into components or subparts. Procedures are then systematically targeted at specific components” (p. 237). Behaviorists impoverish the complexities of human behavior and experience when they subdivide clients’ problems into component parts such as *stimulus* and *response*. For example, a client’s violence may be understood as really just a learned behavioral response to his wife’s nonconforming behavior.

Some scholars might consider client-centered therapy non-reductionistic given its frequent emphasis on viewing clients in a *holistic* manner. However, Rogers explains that his phenomenological holism “relies heavily upon the concept of the self as an explanatory concept” (Raskin, Rogers, & Witty, 2008, p. 51). In other words, as holistic as Rogers and humanism might be, one particular part of this whole is given conceptual ascendancy—the individual self (Rychlak, 1981). Ultimately, Rogers joins other leading psychotherapy theorists in reducing human experience to a self-contained individual that perceives influences as external and independent of the self.

**The assumption of value-freedom.** Reductionism is further evident in mainstream psychotherapists' espousal of value-freedom, a philosophy that reduces values to individual rather than shared beliefs, ethics, or morals (such as community or family values). By assuming that values ought to be held individually, psychotherapists are called upon to remain objective in the practice of psychotherapy, and thus not usurp the individual's right to define their own value system (Slife, Smith, & Burchfield, 2003). (As *ought* in the last sentence implies, there is irony in therapists' dedication to valued-freedom, as this places them in the paradoxical position of universally *valuing* value-freedom itself.) Psychotherapists often strive to detach their personal values from their practice of psychotherapy, instead intending to aid their individual clients in exploring their own individual values.

Practicing therapists likely take the lead from the field's most prominent theorists in adopting value-freedom. Carl Rogers, for example, is particularly explicit in his espousal of value-freedom when he describes a fully functioning person as able to rely on their individual valuing process (Raskin et al., 2008). This means trusting "the evidence of their own senses for making value judgments", and "is in contrast to a fixed system of introjected values characterized by 'oughts' and 'shoulds' and by what is supposed to be right or wrong" (p. 163). In practice, client-centered psychotherapists hope to aid the client toward reliance on their individual valuing process by assuming a nondirective approach to therapy. This means striving to assume a value-free stance. Similarly, Albert Ellis (2008) explains that the purpose of rationally-emotive behavioral therapy is to "enable people to observe, understand, and persistently dispute their irrational, gandise, perfectionistic shoulds, oughts, and musts and their awfulizing" (p. 232). Ellis endorses both value-freedom and hedonism when he suggests the

replacement of “shoulds, oughts, and musts” with personal preferences to reduce a client anxiety and promote individual happiness.

Psychodynamic and behavioral theorists join Rogers and Ellis in endorsing value-freedom through objectivity. Freud suggested that psychotherapists be *blank screens*; achieved, in part, by remaining out of sight of their client who is lying on a couch (Freud, 1912/1963; Luborsky et al., 2008). This therapeutic stance is intended to distance the psychoanalyst as an objective interpreter. In Wilson’s (2008) review of behavioral therapy he concludes that a wide variety of behavioral approaches are united by their commitment to the scientific method and, in turn, value-free objectivity.

Despite psychotherapy’s widespread pursuit of objectivity, several commentators and researchers have contended that a psychologists’ values are inescapable and that efforts to be value-free likely lead to unacknowledged persuasion of the client toward the clinician’s values in psychotherapy (Beutler & Bergan, 1991; Kelly & Strupp, 1992; Slife et al., 2003; Tjeltveit, 1986). These scholars have cautioned that feigned objectivity might be far more ethically dangerous than clinicians being transparent with their values. Regardless of these opposing arguments, prominent psychotherapists have long idealized value-freedom in psychotherapy practice.

Hedonism, reductionism, and value-freedom have been differentiated here for clarity and simplicity. In actuality, these assumptions overlap each other and are strongly related to a prevailing tide of individualism in psychotherapy today. Slife, Yanchar, and Reber (2005) argue that these and other common psychological assumptions often go unchallenged, and are simply accepted as the fundamental truths:

Often the assumptions and guiding values of mainstream psychology are so familiar that they seem like the only possible premises of our work. Indeed, they seem more like axioms and truisms than the working assumptions or fruitful perspectives they are.

Knowing there are alternative possibilities, however, allows students to question the often taken-for-granted assumptions of their field. (p. 5)

In the following section I will identify a relational alternative to each of these assumptions in order to provide a context for understanding each assumption as one rather than the only point of view.

### **A Relational Alternative**

Relationists posit altruism, contextualism, and values-as-inescapable as alternatives to the individualistic assumptions of hedonism, reductionism, and value-freedom. A brief review of each of these alternative relational assumptions will serve to situate each contrasting position as one conceivable point of view and to further explicate some basic tenets of relational philosophy.

**The assumption of altruism.** In strong contrast to self-serving hedonism, altruism is selfless concern for others or “making the other the ultimate end” (Slife, 2004b, p. 63). As such, genuine altruism is giving without hoping for or expecting reciprocation, rewards, or benefits. Altruists do not presume that all thoughts and behaviors *must* be selfless, only that thoughts and behaviors *can* be selfless (Slife, 2004b). As discussed above, psychological theorists predominately propose hedonistic motives as ultimately responsible for all human behavior. In contrast, relational theorists propose the possibility of altruistic motives—that we can act in genuine interest of others (Adler, 1956; Slife, 2004b).

This debate over the existence of genuine altruism has extended into ongoing lines of quantitative research (Batson, 1997; Batson et al., 1997; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, Newberg,

1997; Davis, 1994; Dovidio, Allen, & Schroeder, 1990; Neuberg et al., 1997). However, these researchers have reached no consensus. Some have argued that, taken collectively, research findings support the possibility of genuine altruism, (Batson, 1997; Batson et al., 1997; Dovidio et al., 1990) while others challenge that conclusion—claiming this same body of quantitative research supports the conclusion that human beings perpetually operate hedonistically (Cialdini 1997; Cialdini et al., 1991; Davis, 1994; Neuberg et al., 1997). In other words, researchers on both sides of this debate have interpreted the same experimental findings as supporting their position. Quantitative research has not settled the debate between hedonistic and altruistic theorists, because the conclusions of these quantitative studies are driven by *interpretation* of data rather than being dictated *objectively* by the data. Indeed, many philosophers of science have long argued that quantitative data does not speak objectively for itself, but instead is given meaning through human interpretation (Pepper, 1942; Slife 2004b). Agreeing with these philosophers, some scholars have argued that altruism is an assumption, a starting point for discussion rather than an objectively verifiable position.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1991), for example, has described responsibility to the other as the impetus for his philosophy of human existence. He explains that encountering the other brings about an “upsurge in me of a responsibility prior to commitment, that is, a responsibility for the other” (Levinas, 1991, p. 103). Consistent with altruism, Levinas’s philosophy posits that the responsibility to the other is not merely derived from mutually beneficial interactions (i.e. reciprocity); in fact, this responsibility is not *derived* at all. He suggests that as humans we are “bound in a knot that cannot be undone in a responsibility for others” (Levinas, 1991, p. 105). According to Levinas, this responsibility to another person is the fundamental starting point of the human relationship and constitutes our most basic human



ethical duty. Alongside altruism, Levinas's basic human ethic is thoroughly relational, positioning human relationships as ontologically fundamental—human experience is always bound up in relationships.

**The assumption of contextualism.** In like manner, contextualism is the relational notion that ideas, behaviors, persons, and objects can only be understood relative to their context.

Yanchar (2005), a contextualist, describes it this way:

Contextualism implies that the meaning or qualities of any individual, part, or element are not self-contained or inherent in the part, individual, or element, but derive instead from its relationship to other parts or elements and that larger whole (or context) within which it is situated...Context (and changing contexts) becomes all-important because nothing can be understood apart from the context with which it shares its being and from which it derives its qualities. (p. 172)

Yanchar's explanation characterizes a 'thick' context perspective—that context is deep, expansive, and preminent. Contextualism contrasts with the reductionistic philosophies, overviewed above, that oversimplify and thin human experience.

Reductionists attenuate the rich context of human experience when they isolate individual parts and components of this experience (Griffin, 2000). These parts and components are understood as operating independent of the larger whole, and as such are defined as being self-contained. While self-contained parts may impact one another, this impact is understood as an external force.

To help differentiate reductionism from contextualism, consider a bowling ball striking pins at the end of the bowling lane. From a reductionist perspective, the ball is considered independent of each pin even while it strikes. The ball and each pin is ultimately defined by it

own self-contained physical materials—and these entities are each separate and distinct from the bowling lane and the bowler. The impact between the ball and pins is understood as an independent entity (i.e. the bowling ball) exerting force on each self-contained pin. A contextualist, however, would describe this situation quite differently; each part is seen as mutually constitutive and interdependent. The parts are defined by their relationship to the greater whole. In this scenario the bowling ball, for example, is first understood in relation to its context. When used in a game of bowling the ball is aptly described as a *bowling ball*, but could be fundamentally redefined if repositioned in a different context. In fact, some people have used these balls for garden décor, not to be utilized for the purpose of bowling at all, calling them “garden spheres” (Baltz, 2005, para. 1). A contextualist would agree that this ball is aptly named a garden sphere within this alternative context. In other words, in this new context (without a bowler, lane, and pins) the sphere has been redefined.

Likewise, a contextualist will argue that people cannot be understood absent of their contexts because they are fundamentally defined by them. Mainstream psychology, apt to take a reductionist approach, abstracts people from their contexts (Slife, 2004b). To take a contextual perspective means to conceptualize people as living within a thick, inextricable context. People could not be understood absent of their larger context because this context is fundamentally defining of the person. However, more often a person’s context is reduced into causal forces that act on the self-contained individual. This is evident in prevailing psychological research wherein context is simply one variable to be factored or controlled (Slife & Gantt, 1999). The result of this methodological fragmentation is an illumination of human experience as separate and distinctive from a person’s context, rather than providing a thick perspective of human community and connection. Similarly, personality testing in psychology is frequently aimed at

revealing the context-free, underlying personality of an individual client. By so doing a person's personality is reduced to that which is most stable, enduring, pervasive, and consistent across contexts (Rychlak, 1981). As such, a person's personality is seen as innate and remains independent of the larger whole. These two examples illustrate fragmentation and reductionism in psychological research methods and personality testing and represent a near absence of genuine contextualism within the larger discipline of psychology.

**The assumption of values-as-inescapable.** Some scholars have argued that values are contextually imbedded in all philosophies, cultures, theories, and therapies (O'Donohue, 1989; Slife et al., 2003). As such values are considered inescapable—a position in sharp contrast to those who champion value-freedom. Indeed, relationists claim that values are inescapable as they help define us as people, shaping our most meaningful choices. Values also sift the important from the unimportant and help us organize our experience and relate within the world in meaningful ways (Slife et al., 2003). Perhaps most pertinent, relationists suggest that values play a critical role in human relating. This is because values are not self-contained, but part of a larger relational nexus. As Slife et al. (2003) explain,

[V]alues are intimately related to one another. Part of the energy of values is that they require each other for completeness, including oppositional values. Values exist and make sense only in relation to one another. This means that if values constitute our very being, then we require each other for completeness; we exist and make sense only in relation to other valuing beings. (p. 18)

To assert value-freedom is to claim that there is no such inherent relationship between values—because from this perspective if values exist at all they exist in isolation and are held independently by each individual person. As a result it is often recommended that therapist

assume a value-free, objective stance to avoid influencing their client's values. However, some have noted that it is contradictory to allege this value-free objectivity (Slife et al., 2003) because to espouse value-freedom is to *value* being value-free. For example, a client-centered therapist may perceive himself or herself as value-free when aiming to support a client toward trusting his or her own valuing processes. However, by taking this approach the clinician is demonstrating a personal commitment to individualistic values—promoting that the client *should* come to trust his or her own values. Here the clinician is proselyting on behalf of an individualistic approach to values—that values *ought* to be self-contained and self-determined within each individual client. As such, however, the clinician's values are alive in the very promotion of this individualistic doctrine, despite the clinicians believing his or her therapy to be value-free.

This last example demonstrates how, from the perspective of relationists, therapists cannot escape their own values; furthermore, research seems to suggest that clinicians not only operate based upon their values in therapy, but also persuade their clients toward their own values (Beutler, 1979; Tjeltveit, 1986). That is to say that not only do values play a role in therapy, but that clinicians convert their clients toward their own moral values, worldviews, and ethics. In fact, researchers have found that clinicians often judge progress in treatment based upon a client's movement toward the clinician's values (Beutler, 1979; Kelly & Strupp, 1992). These same scholars argue that clinicians are unaware of their persuasion, perhaps because they perceive their role as objective and value-free. Paul Meehl (1959) feared that clinicians would become *crypto-missionaries*—blindly attempting to convert clients to their own value system. Slife et al. (2003) argue that Meehl's fear has been broadly realized in the everyday practice of psychotherapy in which clinicians mistakenly perceive their work as objective. Instead, therapists may be acting as crypto-missionaries much of the time.

If relationists believe that therapy cannot be conducted without the influence of a clinician's values, does this consign the clinician to being unwitting and dogmatic? Slife (2004b) contends that it does not, suggesting that open dialogue about values in therapy may begin to address this concern: “[O]ne key for therapists is to become more aware of their values (or assumptions), especially as they affect therapy, and to articulate them as they arise, so that the client has an opportunity to give an ongoing, informed consent” (p. 53). If, from this relational perspective, values are critical to a client's experience and relating in the world, then dialogue about values in therapy may be a crucial therapeutic matter. Candid, purposeful involvement of values in a therapy is explored in depth in Fowers' writings on virtue ethics in psychology (Fowers, 2005a, 2005b, 2009; Fowers, Mollica, & Procacci, 2010). I will later review Fowers' conceptualization of virtue ethics.

To this point, the assumptions of contextualism, altruism, and values as inescapable have been presented as if they are distinct concepts. However, for relationists these concepts are inseparably connected to one another. As defined by relationists, each of these concepts shares an overarching philosophy that situates relationships as the most basic reality of human experience. The particular alternatives that were reviewed here were detailed for a distinct purpose—these concepts especially inform the practice of relational psychotherapy, and this will become more clearly evident. However, these three alternatives are only a sampling of assumptions united by relationality. This lattice of relational assumptions might also include concepts like agency, holism, and temporality. Collectively, these relational alternatives are not a new way of thinking, nor isolated to psychology. In fact, relational theories have more accurately been pioneered in differing disciplines.

**Multidisciplinary context.** As indicated, scholars in a variety of fields have proposed alternatives to individualistic philosophies. Relational alternatives have been proposed in fields such as physics, theology, and anthropology. The particular ideas of physicists Albert Einstein and David Bohm, theist Colin Gunton, and anthropologist Franz Boas will provide a window into this multidisciplinary relational context, and their ideas have utility in informing relational theory, research, and practice in psychology.

**Relationality in physics.** Over two-thousand years ago Greek philosophers, Leucippus and Democritus', developed atomic theory as one important organizing theory (Viney & King, 2003), yet this theory was premised upon a fragmentary worldview that reduced reality into distinct, separable, and independent elementary components. Subsequently, the study of physics became unquestionably committed to the notion that the order of the universe is fragmentary and mechanistic (Bohm, 1980). When human knowledge consists only of methods that permit us to predict and control, radical fragmentation and thoroughgoing confusion are the results—even the human mind is treated as a fragmented object.

Physicist David Bohm (1980) argues that the sustainability of atomic theory is attributable to scientists' tendency to view theory as transcendent *truth* instead of a way of looking at things. Doing so limits our ability to consider alternative worldviews. Theory, he says, is simply insight—a way of looking at the world—rather than knowledge of how the world is. In other words, theories are not true or false, but insights that provide a source for organizing our experience. Einstein's theory of relativity was the first significant indication in physics of the need to question this fragmented and mechanistic worldview (Bohm, 1980). He argued that if the presuppositions of questions are wrong, then the questions scientists ask would be wrong.

Einstein saw that questions having to do with space and time and the particle nature of matter, as commonly accepted in the physics of his day, involved confused presuppositions that had to be dropped, and thus he was able to come to ask new questions leading to radically different notions on the subject. (Bohm, 1980, p. 28)

The assumptions of atomism were dropped in Einstein's relativity theory and subsequently, in Bohm's quantum theory. According to these theorists there is no division between the observed and the observer. "[T]he non-local, non-causal nature of the relationships of elements distant from each other evidently violates the requirements of separateness and independence of fundamental constituents that is basic to any mechanistic approach" (Bohm, 1980, pp. 175-176). What relativistic and quantum theories have in common is undivided, relational wholeness (arguably, a more radical wholeness in quantum theory). Every moment and space is inseparably related to the totality of time and space. Mind and matter, for example, are inseparable, different aspects of the larger whole (Bohm, 1980).

***Relationality in theology.*** Theist Colin Gunton (1993) sees Christianity's most pervasive conceptions of God as leading to modern fragmentation of theology, culture, and the world. Although from the beginning of Western thought the concept of God has provided a unifying focus for the world, from as early as St. Augustine, the character of God was framed in terms of separateness (Gunton, 1993; Viney & King, 2003). And in an attempt to relate, humans rationalized their concept of God. Gunton suggests that this rationalizing about God was the beginning of the road to complete displacement of divinity, wherein people became gods unto themselves, no longer seeking the good, true, and beautiful—instead creating their own truth and values. In fact, from within this historical context philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche concluded that God must be denied that human society should be free. This is consistent with Ludwig

Feuerbach's (1854/1957) thesis that the worship of God necessarily costs humans their individuality and freedom: "To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing" (p. 25).

Gunton (1993) claims that modern culture's subsequent denial of God in an attempt to free humanity has, in fact, enslaved even further, and in more sophisticated ways. Specifically, he claims that "modern individualism breeds homogeneity" (p. 30). This concern is echoed by Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1978) who described the leveling tendency of the modern age.

[O]nly when there is no strong communal life to give substance to the concretion will the press create this abstraction 'the public', made up of unsubstantial individuals who are never united or never can be united in the simultaneity of any situation or organization and yet are claimed to be a whole. (p. 91)

In other words, while purporting to celebrate the individual, human attempts at recognizing the other amount to subordination and isolation rather than connection. Furthermore, Gunton argues that distinctiveness is abolished when we reduce the richness and complexity of things to the mere sharing of common characteristics.

When God is displaced as the focus of the unity of things, the function he performs does not disappear, but is exercised by some other source of unity—some other universal. The universal is false because it does not encompass the realities of human relations and of our placing in the world and so operated deceptively or oppressively. (Gunton, 1993, p. 31)

In order to heal the great divisions that hold the human race down and apart, Gunton (1993) proposes understanding Diety as "a unity of persons in relation" (p. 215) without



subordinating one divine attribute to the other: the timeless and transcendent nature of God the Father, the redemptive and personal nature of Jesus Christ, and the perfecting and particular relationality of the Holy Ghost. In this concept humans can see analogies of their own constitutions as being created in the image of God, and instead of being distinctive in separateness, they can be distinctive in relationships. A theology that acknowledges this sort of otherness allows people to be “understood as substantial beings, having their own distinct and particular existence, *by virtue of and not in face of their relationality to the other*” (pp. 194-195).

Gunton (1993) proposes that with this relationality, everything in the world contributes to the being of everything else, enabling everything to be what it distinctively is. “If the world is creation, then it has its own particular being, even if that being is not separable from its relation to its maker and redeemer” (p. 166).

***Relationality in anthropology.*** Anthropologist Franz Boas did not explicate as thorough or consistent a relational ontology as Gunton or Bohm, though he certainly places an emphasis on the importance of understanding persons in relation to their broader contexts. Considered the father of modern anthropology (Gaillard, 1997/2004) Boas was instrumental in establishing a discipline arguably more compatible with relationality than either physics or theology has been. Following his pioneering fieldwork, anthropologists have come to study humans relationally, deeply embedded within communities and cultures. Boas (1928/1962) contrasted his discipline with anatomy, physiology, and psychology in saying, “they deal primarily with the typical form and function of the human body and mind...[their] interest centers always in the individual as a type, and in the significance of this appearance in functions form a morphological, physiological or psychological point of view. To the anthropologist, on the contrary, the individual appears important only as a member of a racial or social group” (p. 12). In this way, anthropology has

developed a tradition of conceptualizing people within a relational context. Boas further explicated his relational stance when he posited that society cannot be reduced to the mere summation of its self-contained individuals. “The state of society at a given moment...is not the sum of the activities of the individuals; rather individuals and society are functionally related” (p. 246, 1928/1962).

Boas’s approach to research seems consistent with his relational conceptualizing, and some consider his research methods to be his most lasting legacy (Haviland, 1978). Boas relied heavily on ethnographic research methods—seeking discovery from within a social group by actively joining and participating within this group while recording his first-hand experience (Boas, 1962; Gaillard, 1997/2004; Haviland, 1978). In fact, Boas advocated that anthropological scientists be engaged in a meaningful relationship with the cultures they are studying. He saw these cultures more as his teachers than as objects. For over a century anthropological researchers have followed Boas’s lead, predominantly relying on ethnographic methods for investigating contemporary cultures and groups (Gaillard, 1997/2004; Haviland, 1978). These researchers have actively engaged within a group’s relational context, living in this context for extended periods of time. This rich, complex lived-experience is their basic means of studying particular groups. As a result of this approach to inquiry, ethnographers derive a more holistic and contextualized understanding of these groups, as opposed to scientists utilizing more traditional methods that result in more reductionistic accounts (Gaillard, 1997/2004; Haviland, 1978; Swartz & Jordan, 1976).

An ethnographic approach to scientific discovery contrasts sharply with prevailing scientific methods wherein scientists seek value-free objectivity. Commonly, scientists are called upon to strive for objectivity through attempting to be detached as the researcher—gathering data

from a distance and purporting to exert no influence on the phenomena of interest. In contrast, Boas was weary of this type of objectivity, noting that scientists seek rather than avoid direct contact with their research subjects. He also acknowledged that researchers see the world through the lens of their own culture, though he did recommend that anthropologists attempt to suspend their own cultural values. As such, Boas seemed to encourage a particular type of objectivity, saying,

The scientific study of generalized social forms requires, therefore, that the investigator free himself from all valuations based on our culture. An objective, strictly scientific inquiry can be made only if we succeed in entering into each culture on its own basis, if we elaborate the ideals of each people and include in our general objective study cultural values as found among different branches of mankind. (1928/1962, pp. 204-205)

In this, Boas seemed to retreat short of embracing thoroughly relational research methods; a thoroughgoing relationist would likely contend that suspending one's values is impossible, even in research (see previous section, Values-as-Inescapable).

In many disciplines scientists seek generalizable laws and numerical operations, though Boas questioned this approach. He doubted the attainability of social laws for perfectly predicting or generalizing social phenomena, "I do not believe that we shall ever be able to explain [phenomena] by reducing one and all of them to social laws" (pp. 215-216). Instead he sees anthropology as a way to understand social phenomena relative to historical and situational context; Boas termed his approach 'historical particularism' (Gaillard, 1997/2004). Boas had such influence on American anthropology that the early decades of the twentieth century were almost without theoretical generalizations (Swartz & Jordan, 1976).

Boas considered deductive methods of science to be presumptive because this approach necessarily begins with a theoretical generalization—a hypothesis (Gaillard, 1997/2004). Instead Boas promoted inductive methods, suggesting that scientific investigation should begin with the particulars. As such he insisted on comprehensive or holistic methods of data gathering, encouraging the gathering of all types of data (Gaillard, 1997/2004). While Boas himself placed an emphasis on empirical data, his conceptualization of empirical data seems much more broadly conceived than is typical today. Prevailing science today seems to almost exclusively rely on quantifiable, sensory data (Slife & Gantt, 1999). Certainly Boas did not restrict or reduce his data to numerical representation of sensory data.

In all, the approach to scientific exploration promoted by Boas is consistent with relational philosophy in that his methods recognize the thick particulars and relational foundations of human life. Boas was instrumental in establishing a scientific discipline that has encouraged researchers to seek understanding from within, in contrast to prevailing research approaches in other disciplines that purposefully position researchers as detached, disengaged, and objective. In fact, until recently few psychologists have embraced conceptualizations of human life as relational, and as a result research in this field has remained conventional—typically quantitative.

### **Relationality in Psychology**

Most relevant to the present study, there has been growing interest in relational psychological explanations. Several theorists and theoretical camps have articulated ideas that are quite relational.

**Gestalt psychology.** Gestalt psychologists are widely known for their deeply contextual theorizing of human experience and perception. For gestaltists the perceptual whole is given

conceptual primacy, in contrast to considering this a secondary quality that emerges from combining self-contained parts. “The nature of any gestalten is not determined by individual elements; rather the nature or meaning of the individual elements is determined by how they fit into the broader whole or context” (Yanchar, 2005, p. 174). Said another way, the gestalt psychologist considers the whole to be a system that is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts. Parts of a whole are interdependent and this whole has emergent qualities that cannot be accounted for as simply a summation of individual parts. In fact, the whole is considered ontologically prior to the sum of its parts (Wertheimer, 1983).

Since from the perspective of a gestalt psychologist parts or elements are not the most basic reality; the pattern, organization, and unified whole of a phenomenon is of basic and primary importance (Viney & King, 2003). This suggests a relational wholeness because things cannot be understood independently, but instead must be conceptualized in relationship to the larger context. Nothing can transcend embeddedness within this greater whole.

Gestalt theorizing and research has focused on a variety of psychological domains including thinking, perception, learning, and development (Viney & King, 2003). And Max Wertheimer, a pioneering Gestalt theorist, even envisioned the application of gestalt philosophy outside of psychology. For example, he felt that this philosophy held strong implication in ethics, democracy, freedom, and education (Viney & King, 2003).

Yontef and Jacobs (2009) have elaborated on how psychotherapists can put gestalt theories into clinical practice. They contend that Gestalt psychotherapy is based on the “radical ecological theory that maintains there is no meaningful way to consider any living organism apart from its interactions with its environment—that is, apart from the organism-environment field of which it is a part” (p. 351). This field environment is replete with other people and, from

the perspective of the Gestalt psychologist, there is no ‘self’ without others. All people exist only in relation to others, and all are in constant contact with others.

Contact, thus, plays a primary role in therapy beginning with contact between the client and therapist (Yontef & Jacobs, 2009). Contact is considered genuine in that a real relationship is encouraged between the client and therapist. The therapist is not considered an objective or expert interpreter. The therapeutic relationship is critically important because it provides present information about relational processes and opportunities for exploration and intervention. “In a good therapy relationship, the therapist pays close attention to what the patient is doing moment to moment and to what is happening between the therapist and the patient. The therapist not only pays close attention to what the patient experiences but also deeply believes that the patient’s subjective experience is just as real and valid as the therapist’s ‘reality’” (Yontef & Jacobs, 2009, p. 361). As clinicians focus on the here-and-now relational processes they may notice relational patterns emerging, perhaps resembling patterns that occur outside of therapy. Clinicians also value subjective interpretations that a client shares, such that renditions of a client’s history are considered present, meaningful interpretations. Yontef and Jacobs argue that one goal of therapy is to develop awareness of how these interpretations are alive in the here-and-now. These authors also suggest that other treatment focal points should similarly remain grounded in the basic contextual philosophies of Gestalt psychology.

**Social constructionism.** Like Gestalt philosophy, social constructionist philosophy proffers an account of human life that is contextually embedded (Gergen, 2009a; Richardson, 2000). Prominent social constructionist, Kenneth Gergen (2009a, 2009b) has carefully elaborated how constructionist philosophy considers relationship as grounding all human experience. “It is within [social] relationships that we construct the world in this way or that. In relationships the

world comes to be what it is for us” (Gergen, 2009a, p. 3). Furthermore, Gergen (2009a) posits that all we take to be true in the world originates in relationships. “[R]elationships stand prior to all that is intelligible. Nothing exists for us as an intelligible world of objects and persons until there are relationships” (p. 6).

Outside commentators seem to agree that social constructionists’ relational conceptualization of human life is in strong contrast to the traditional individualist notion of self-contained individuals interfacing with otherwise separate selves (Gantt, 2005; Richardson, 2000). Social constructionists presume that people operate from within a nexus of inextricable relationships. This sociality fundamentally defines what we are (Gergen, 2009a). Constructionists also illuminate how the negotiation of meanings lies at the very center of this human sociality. In fact, social constructionism is premised on the idea that “nothing is real unless people agree that it is” (Gergen, 2009a, p. 4). People define reality from their particular standpoint. Accordingly, the traditional scientific assumptions of objectivity, prediction, and control become implausible. There is no objective reference for discovering a causal sequence. From this point of view, it is not that there is no ultimate reality, rather that the concept of reality is itself a social construction. All terms, descriptions, conceptualizations, definitions, and language have their origin in human communities (Gergen, 2009a). In fact, it is through dialogue between people that reality is created.

Some commentators (Gantt, 2005; Richardson, 2000; Slife & Richardson, 2010) have expressed concern that a socially constructed reality results in moral relativism. From the constructivist point of view there seems to be no limits on true interpretations, because truth is decided by social consensus. In this way, any and all truth is considered a constructed concept. Gergen (1985) has responded to concerns about this resulting relativism by recommending that

values and truth claims be carefully evaluated based on their pragmatic implications. However, critics have questioned whether this rescues the issue given widely divergent perspectives in deciding between pragmatic implications (Gantt, 2005; Slife & Richardson, 2010). Some scholars have proposed relational philosophies grounded on somewhat different assumptions. For example, hermeneutic relationists have questioned whether reality and truth are merely constructed. Instead, these relationists suggest lived experience to be deeply grounded in reality.

**Hermeneutic psychology.** Hermeneutic psychologists, like social constructionists, reject an approach to social science based on prediction and control, cause and effect, and manipulation of so called independent variables (Gantt, 2005). This is because both philosophies firmly reject a naturalistic approach to science that informs psychology's most dominant methodologies. Naturalist methodologies assume reductionism, objectivity, and determinism by treating their subjects as universally governed by natural laws that allow for such manipulation, prediction, and control (Richardson et al., 1999). In fact the goal of research, from this perspective, is to discover the laws that govern human behavior. To accomplish this goal human experience is often reduced to that which is measurable and quantifiable. Social scientists study human behavior from an assumedly objective stance, as if the objects studied are independent of our own interpretations (Richardson et al., 1999).

Psychologist Frank Richardson (2000) considers hermeneutic knowledge claims neither independently objective, nor socially constructed. He contrasts this naturalistic approach to psychological study to a hermeneutic approach, while also distinguishing hermeneutic and constructionist thought:

In the hermeneutic view, understanding human life does not, in the main, consist of proffering objectifying explanations. It is focused instead on understanding meaning-



laden human activities and experiences. However, in this view, understanding neither reaches any sort of final, objective account of what events mean nor is it a matter of utterly groundless 'linguistic constructions.' Historical experience changes the meaning events can have for us, not because it alters our view of an independent object, but because historical and cultural existence are a dialectical process in which both the object and our knowledge of it are continually transformed. (pp. 299-300)

According to Richardson, hermeneutic psychology presumes no dichotomous split between the observer and the object. Rather both are embedded participants in an ongoing and entangled interplay and coexistence. There is also no mere constructed reality, from this point of view. *Out there* reality is accessible through lived experience. This is not presumed to come through objective sensory input, but through relationship within a living context.

Furthermore, hermeneutic psychology is concerned with understanding human behavior in historical and relational context rather than controlling, predicting, or explaining behavior through natural laws and causal antecedents (Gantt, 2005). Human beings are not viewed as simply reactive to causal forces or reducible to biological substances. Fundamentally, hermeneutic scholars view humans as self-interpreting, meaning-making beings; people are defined by the meanings that they work out through everyday living (Gantt, 2005; Richardson, 2000).

[H]ermeneutic psychologists are primarily interested in articulating the contextual and historical meanings within which human behavior makes sense and derives its purpose. Thus, they are concerned not only with accounting for the many ways in which culture and tradition provide the inescapable moral frameworks for all meaningful human

activity but also in examining how everyday practical human activities and relationships give rise to those frameworks. (Gantt, 2005, p. 87)

Accordingly, hermeneutic psychologists make it clear that human meaning is fundamentally connected to our relationships within a broader cultural and relational context. Meaning is developed in active relationship within this context. In this way, hermeneutics is often considered a deeply relational position, situating human relationship as ontologically fundamental (Richardson et al., 1999).

**Virtue ethics.** From a relationists' perspective, a person's complete relational context includes shared values and morals. In my earlier review of values in psychology, the position of several scholars (O'Donohue, 1989; Slife et al., 2003) was found consistent with the findings of a significant body of research evidencing values to be inescapable; this position begs consideration of the moral implications of our values. How *ought* we live? If values inform our intentions, pursuits, and activities, then responding to this query is not only theoretical, but also highly applicable and consequential. Blaine Fowers' addresses this complex issue by examining Aristotle's account of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Fowers, 2009; Fowers, 2005b). In these writings Aristotle positioned *eudaimonia*, or flourishing, as the chief human good and life pursuit. Not simply a feeling, state, or attitude—flourishing is a way of life. "A flourishing life is characterized by actions consistently and cumulatively undertaken for the sake of worthwhile ends within meaningful social bonds. Flourishing is not an episodic experience, but a matter of the way that one's life shapes up as a whole over time" (Fowers, 2009, p. 1012).

According to Fowers (2005b), to live with virtue means to develop reliable daily habits of generosity, honesty, courage, and other worthy pursuits. Virtues become character strengths when they come to be characteristic of the person who has made living with virtue habitual.

Ideally, living a virtuous life becomes automatic as one comes to embody excellence in thought, affect, and behavior. In addition to becoming basically automatic, Fowers (2005b) contends that strong character is epitomized by an honest and unqualified desire to act virtuously, in contrast to one who fights against selfish or conflicted interests. Instead, one is intrinsically attracted to that which is good. This indelible and genuine virtuous living enables individuals to “pursue their goals and ideals and to flourish as human being” (Fowers, 2005b, p. 4).

What constitutes worthy pursuits? Aristotle emphasized the importance of pursuing worthwhile ends, if one is to live virtuously. In contrast, psychological theories commonly characterize individuals as self-interested (hedonistic) in that they perpetually behave towards extrinsic rewards or goals. From this perspective, means are separated from ends such that our behaviors are *instrumental* means to pursuing a hedonistic end. According to Aristotle, however, to live with virtue is to pursue meaningful goals because they are worthwhile in and of themselves. This, according to Fowers et al. (2010), amounts to a constitutive goal orientation, as means and ends are inherently related or indistinguishable. Friendship, for example, is pursued for its own sake, rather than for some self-interested utility. Flourishing is to habitually pursue constitutive goals within meaningful social contexts (Fowers et al., 2010).

Emphasizing the relational nature of virtue, Fowers (2005b) explains that these character strengths are both taught and expressed within a social context. In fact, he argues that virtue itself is irreducibly and necessarily shared.

[V]irtue is inextricably communal. Humans gain an appreciation of character from others, learn the virtues from others engage in virtuous activity with others, pursue goods we can only hold in common with others, and practice many primary virtues (e.g., friendship, generosity, justice) only with others. Each individual must decide whether or not to

engage in admirable activities, but the context meaning, import, and recognition of fine actions is profoundly social. (p. 104)

**Relational ontology.** The preceding psychological theories and theorists I have reviewed each emphasize a relational conceptualization of human experience. While gestalt, social constructionist, hermeneutic, and virtue ethics psychologists nuance their relational positions in particular ways (i.e., clear distinctions exist in their relational theorizing), each seems committed to a shared, communal grounding of human experience. Unlike more pervasive psychological theories that position people as first self-contained and independent, and second interacting between one another, these psychologists consider people to be primarily interrelated and interdependent. Fundamentally they assume human experience to be mutually constitutive, in that the qualities of each person are derived from their relationship to other people and things. This philosophy of the basic nature of human experience has been termed a relational *ontology* (Slife, 2004a).

Distinguishing between weak and strong relationality may be helpful in clarifying psychological relational ontology. Many, if not most, psychological theories take up a form of what Slife (2004a) termed *weak* relationality. These psychological theories are apt to consider environmental and social influences that act on and interact with individuals, while maintaining the doctrines of individualism—that each entity that interacts is most basically independent. In other words, these influences are just that, outside and external *influences*. The basic identity of the entity comes from that which is inside the entity itself. Relationship is curtailed to reciprocal exchanges between two independent entities (Slife, 2004a). True relationship, if defined as that which is genuinely shared between people or things, becomes an illusion because there is no

shared betweenness. The impact of external forces is all that one can experience in relation to others.

In contrast, a *strong* relational perspective considers all entities as having a shared existence and nature; they are thus viewed as inseparably related to other entities. The other is vital to strong relationists because the other is constitutive of the self (Slife, 2004a). In other words, all people and things have a shared being. “[All things] start out and forever remain in relationship. Their very qualities, properties, and identities cannot stem completely from what is inherent or ‘inside’ them but must depend on how they are related to each other” (Slife, 2004a, p. 159). As such we cannot understand an entity outside of its relational context. Because this context is paramount and inseparable, relationists place much more than a trite emphasis on the historical and situational context. To conceptualize a person is to view him or her holistically—embedded within a thick nexus of community, culture, family, friendships, values, and so forth (Slife, 2004a).

This perspective is in contrast to traditional personality theories that attempt to abstract persons from their context, revealing the innate or internal nature of a person. These personality theorists search for elements of personality that are consistent across time and context (Rychlak, 1981). Discovery of these elements is assumed to reveal the true inner personality of an individual. In other words, a person’s most basic personality is assumed to be something that can be abstracted from his or her context. Relationists question this common premise for studying personality—arguing that personality is always strongly interdependent, situated within a historical and situational context. To study personality is to study an entity that is dynamic and mutually constituted within this context.

## Relational Psychotherapy

Taking seriously the concerns raised about blindly adopting individualism, psychotherapists might consider adopting an approach to treating psychological health through fundamentally affecting relationships. A person's problems may be conceptualized as being rooted in relational dysfunction and treated through relational change. However, the "how to practice" strong relationality in psychotherapy seems somewhat less developed than the conceptual ideas of relational ontology.

**Practicing weak relationality.** A number of psychotherapy theorists place high value on relationships when treating psychological concerns. For example, Harry Stack Sullivan proposed a model of psychotherapy commonly termed interpersonal psychoanalysis. Sullivan's (1953) theorizing shifted away from the classic psychoanalytic focus on intrapsychic processes toward interactional processes that occur between people and within social groups. In Sullivan's view individuals cannot be understood independent from their relational context. This view suggests a distinct relational shift with therapeutic repercussions. For example, Sullivan suggested a reorientation of the therapeutic relationship wherein a therapist is considered necessarily engaging in a genuine, present relationship. As such, the interpersonal reactions of both the client and therapist inside their relationship are quite salient to treatment (Luborsky et al., 2008). In contrast, classic analytic theory orients therapists in a detached, objective role as a *blank screen* upon which clients may project transference. More recently, relational psychoanalytic theorist Stephen Mitchell (2000) contributed substantially to the dialogue surrounding psychoanalysis and relationality. He contends that relational theories are incompatible with the individualistic drive theories of classic psychoanalysis.

Other psychoanalytic, experiential, existential, and humanistic theorists have similarly reoriented practice in ways that place increasing value on client's relational context. However, some psychotherapy commentators (Gergen, 2009b; Richardson et al., 1999; Slife & Richardson, 2008) have argued that few of these attempts have been consistent or thoroughgoing in their relational conceptualizations. The philosophy that underlies these approaches remains, at best, a mixed-model—a melding of individualist and relational assumptions. Sullivan, for example, seemed to retain a basic individualistic assumption when he placed strong emphasis on early childhood relationships in determining relating patterns later in life (Sullivan, 1953). This past-causes-present linear assumption may be problematic to some strong relationists and their emphasis on present, here-and-now context (Slife & Wiggins, 2009). The past may play a role in therapy and certainly in shaping a client's life experience, but strong relationists do not assume the past to be determining of the present or objectively accessed. Rather, clients are seen as actively interpreting the past from within their present context. In a very real way, the past is therefore changeable, given a client's ability to reinterpret (Slife, 1993).

Similarly, while many notable psychotherapists and psychotherapy traditions have seriously considered the import of relationships in psychological conceptualization and treatment, these approaches have often presumed the individual's needs, goals, wishes, growth, or well-being of foremost importance (Gergen, 2009b; Slife & Wiggins, 2009). Furthermore, relationships are often regarded as the interactions of two or more independent, self-contained individuals. For example, Gergen's (2009a) and Reber and Osbeck's (2005) review of social psychology reveals that despite this discipline's commitment to the study of human sociality, it has essentially grounded itself in ontological individualism. Individual persons are commonly

assumed to be the premise of social groups, while relationships within these groups are a “byproduct of independent individuals coming together” (Gergen, 2009a, p. 89).

**Practicing strong relationality.** Recently, some psychologists have begun to consider how to practice a thoroughgoing relational ontology in psychotherapy. Slife & Wiggins’ (2009) proposed ten features for strong relational psychotherapy. They did not consider these features exhaustive, only as an attempt to clarify the implications of adopting strong relationality in psychotherapy. These features are particularly salient to the present study as Brent Slife, the primary author of the ten features, is a co-founder and consultant for the therapeutic boarding school researched here. As will be discussed further, this school strives to embody strong relationality. They have utilized these features to help guide their programming.

The following italicized ten features represent exact wording as put forth by Slife & Wiggins (2009), followed by a brief explanation of each feature. *Feature 1: Relationships, especially interpersonal ones, are the most crucial aspects of life and living.* Slife and Wiggins posit that relationships are the most basic and real aspect of the human experience. As such relationality is less about therapeutic technique and more about ontology—defining that which is most real (Slife & Richardson, 2008). A therapist’s approach will be fundamentally altered if starting with the basic premise that people are most fundamentally social creatures. Principally important to all relational therapeutic conceptualizations and processes is this basic grounding of the nature of humanity.

*Feature 2: Relationships should be good rather than satisfying, because a true relationship is more about virtuous relations than an individual’s personal satisfaction.* As was previously discussed, assuming individualism often means assuming hedonism—that at our core humans live and behave for the sake of self-benefit and happiness (Slife & Richardson, 2008).



Alternatively, a relational therapist would argue that good relationships may require personal sacrifice and suffering. Consider the beginning stages of human life, wherein a mother sacrifices about nine months of discomfort, and experiences significant pain during childbirth for the sake of the newborn child. Strong relationists would argue motherhood cannot be fully and universally explained by her self-interested motives (though, in some cases, self-interest may exist). For many mothers this sacrifice is selfless, motivated by love toward the unborn child. What is most important to her is not pursuing some personal needs and happiness, but giving and loving in a sacrificial way for the sake of her unborn child.

As was noted in reviewing Fower's (2005b) explication of virtue ethics, Aristotle contended that to live with virtue one must pursue meaningful goals because they are worthwhile in and of themselves, rather than as a means to a self-serving end. This bears implications concerning the nature of good relations. This may mean seeking relationship for the sake of relationship itself, rather than to use another person to meet some self-interest.

*Feature 3: Fear of rejection—the fear that we do not belong, are not acceptable, or do not have meaningful relations—is the greatest of all the fears and anxieties.* Twenge (2002) conducted quasi-experimental research exploring whether a person's perception of their future relationships, or lack thereof, will impact their decision-making. Indeed, she found that participants who perceived that they would end up alone in life made irrational decisions, took self-defeating risks, chose unhealthy behaviors, and procrastinated longer than a control group who perceived their future to be marred by frequent accidents and yet expected to maintain meaningful relations. These findings lend support to the idea that fear of rejection may be more impactful than a fear of physical harm. More than this, Slife and Wiggins (2009) argue that the

fear of rejection would trump all other human fears, even death. In fact, fear of death may be conceived relationally as fearing the loss of relationships.

*Feature 4: All clients must be understood “thickly,” in relationship to their interpersonal, temporal, situational, and moral context, which include the interpreting therapist.* Therapists most frequently see clients individually, extracted from their more common day-to-day contexts. From a thick context relational perspective, to simply assume each client comes into a therapist’s office with the same problems and patterns existing elsewhere is problematic. It becomes incumbent, then, that the therapist enters the rich, lived experience of the client, avoiding tunnel vision in serving a client. Though a client may present him or herself with a concern about feeling depressed because of recent job loss, only focusing on the meaning of this job loss may handicap the therapist in understanding other important contextual factors impacting the client’s situation. From a thick context perspective the relationship between the client and the therapist matters as well. The therapist enters into the client’s lived experience, and is not treating the client as an independent and objective observer (Slife & Wiggins, 2009).

*Feature 5: Part of the temporality of all contexts is possibilities, implying that a relational human agency is important (along with the responsibility it implies).* Relational human agency means the individuals have the opportunity to make choices, with contextual parameters around the choices that are made (Slife & Wiggins, 2009). People do not have the choice to fly, outside of the context of an airplane or another device that enables this choice. In regards to psychological functioning, a client may be unaware of some of the possibilities that are available, perhaps perceiving their disorder or problems as biologically or environmentally caused. Although biological and environmental contextual elements may contribute to their problems, from this perspective it would be problematic to assume that these elements are sole

determinants (Slife & Wiggins, 2009). One of the goals of relational therapy, then, is to help clients see agentic alternatives for their lives when they desire change.

*Feature 6: The therapist's 'here-and-now' relationship with the client is the most pivotal aspect of the therapeutic experience and should be focused upon to facilitate change.* The therapeutic relationship is the only relationship that is directly available during psychotherapy. For relationists, processing interactions between the client and the therapist enables the client to look at his or her way of relating with another. The client and therapist may see meaningful alternatives available for the client to relate more virtuously (Slife & Wiggins, 2009).

Relational existentialists Yalom and Leszcz (2005) describe two stages to utilizing the here-and-now therapeutic relationship to benefit therapeutic change: the activation phase and process illumination. The activation phase is the process of moving away from abstract discussions about outside ideas and life experiences of the client into a concrete discussion of the here-and-now relationship in a session. The therapeutic relations may mirror outside relations of the client, though this cannot be assumed to always be the case. At times a client may find herself relating in a rather unique way in the therapeutic relationship, spontaneously. This underscores the importance of context in the way people relate. Here-and-now activation remains highly useful in this situation by identifying a behavior inconsistent with more general or problematic patterns of relating. In fact, this naturally illuminates the genuine possibility of alternatives to ways of relating to others.

Whether or not the in-session relationship mirrors outside relationships, reflecting serves to illuminate the process, helping the client and therapist to observe and evaluate the relating processes that occurred between them. As the client is able to reflect on the relating that occurs in session, a meaningful discussion of possible alternatives can ensue, opening up agentic

possibilities (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Finally these possibilities can be put into action (e.g. practiced) by changing the therapeutic relationship.

*Feature 7: Abstractions (theories, principles) are important but are secondary and should be derived from thick particulars.* Often clinicians utilize abstract concepts such as a diagnosis or a case conceptualization to guide treatment. Adopting a relational ontology challenges the oft-presumed acuity of this practice, questioning whether clients fit neatly within these pre-conceptualizations. In fact, people may regularly break the mold of particular preconceptions, even if thoughtfully and clinically derived. A relational approach would utilize humble, changeable abstractions that are developed through understanding the particulars of client's lived experience (Slife & Wiggins, 2009).

*Feature 8: Relationships are not solely based on sameness (e.g., agreement, matching); difference or 'otherness' is vital to individual identity and intimacy.* Oftentimes we may even sacrifice being honest and genuine to placate others—adopting a role that we think will gain their approval. While there may be some wonderful ways in which we can relate to others because of shared experiences and attributes, Slife and Wiggins (2009) posit that learning to enjoy the differences between people can strengthen relationships. Differences may even be reinterpreted as complementary or help us to critically reexamine our own attitudes and experiences.

*Feature 9: Others are never reducible or capturable. Consequently, therapists and clients must be humble about their conceptions and perceptions of others, because these conceptions are always incomplete and never final.* The expert role of the therapist is commonly debated within psychology, as some approaches would hesitate to accept such a role while others prefer to consider the client as the expert. From a relational approach it would likely seem problematic to call either the therapist or the client an expert, as both come to therapy and engage

in a mutual relationship. At most the clinician may adopt a guiding role to help the client through examination, discovery, and change. The client's perceptions of the details of his or her life are perhaps the most critical data available in treatment. As such any conception held by a therapist should be considered temporary and incomplete. The therapist may frequently be wrong (Slife & Wiggins, 2009).

*Feature 10: Meaning and practice are central, because they require situated engagement in the world, including engagement in the temporality (past, present, and future) of one's life narrative.* A client's past, present, and future are important as they reflect themselves in the therapeutic relationship and as the client experiences the meaning of his or her life from within his or her own narratives. From a relational perspective the past, present, and future of a client are changeable, because they exist as a perception that can be re-interpreted (Slife & Wiggins, 2009). However, perhaps more salient, is a client's present efforts to relate meaningfully and virtuously.

### **Relationality-in-Action**

While some scholars have begun to elucidate relational theory and practice, I am not aware of any published evaluation of thorough-going relational therapy in practice. The investigation pursued here intends to assess the treatment of a number of students receiving interventions guided by relationality at Greenbrier Academy (GBA). GBA, a therapeutic boarding school for female adolescents, has adopted relationality as the fundamental philosophy guiding therapeutic treatment. The operators of this program claim that relationality permeates all scholastic and therapeutic activities within the academy. For example, teachers at the school seek to teach their subject matter in a manner informed by relational philosophy (Slife, 2012).

The school's website purports that the integration of relationality across campus distinguishes GBA from other boarding schools.

One of the main differences that sets Greenbrier Academy apart is how we integrate our philosophy and therapeutics throughout all aspects of student life. That philosophy is based in helping young women develop worthwhile, uplifting and virtuous relationships with their peers, their families, themselves, their community and with the world around them. (Greenbrier Academy, 2010, paragraph 2)

While other therapeutic boarding schools may also place importance on relationships, GBA claims itself unique in thoroughly integrating relationality, such that creating quality relationships is given strong conceptual and effectual primacy.

Briefly detailed, GBA is a private pay, therapeutic boarding school with capacity to house over fifty adolescent females, ages 13-18. The academy is located in West Virginia, on a large, 140-acre wooded property. In addition to more traditional scholastic activities students participate in service learning, equine therapy, outdoor adventure, recreational sports, drumming, and community arts. Students participate in weekly sessions of individual therapy and daily sessions of group therapy. Additionally, the academy requires periodic family involvement within the program, including family therapy. Students come to the academy from a wide variety of backgrounds and presenting concerns including substance abuse, emotional distress, high anxiety, dysfunctional family or peer relations, identity problems, isolation, eating disorders, and conduct concerns. A student's length of stay can range from a few months to more than a year, depending on therapeutic and educational progress, financial constraints, and decisions of the treatment team (which includes professional staff, parents, and students).

GBA is explicit about the values that guide treatment, most fundamentally placing value on virtuous relationships. Five value-laden *aspirations* help map the students' progress towards this overarching goal. Slife (2012) has explained these aspirations as being explicitly tied to relational ontology, and more specifically to virtue ethics. As described by Fowers (2005b), virtuous ends are character strengths that are pursued for their own sake, in contrast to instrumental (means-to-an-end) pursuits. For example, living honestly for the sake of being honest, not for the sake of reward or out of fear of punishment. Aristotle considered virtues as worthy ends in themselves. As may be inferred, GBA's aspirations intend to embody virtuous ends or goals. Each aspiration is distinguished with explicit relational values, including respect, courtesy and compassion, empathy and forgiveness, humility and honor, and trust. Students must demonstrate embodiment of each virtue before moving to the next aspiration. A council of peers and staff makes assessment and recommendation for this progress. Despite moving through these aspirations sequentially, living each virtue never reaches finality. Students return to previously developed virtues repeatedly as required by contextual circumstances. In fact, students aim to develop these character strengths deeply, such that living each virtue becomes habitual, part of how they continually relate to others.

Other therapeutic and programmatic elements could similarly be highlighted along with their intended tie to strong relationality. Yet evaluation of the success of GBA in applying relationality would be somewhat conceptual. In fact, evaluation of this success is based in the lived experiences of its students and is one major purposes of this qualitative investigation. Prior to detailing the purposes of this study further, the rationale for selecting qualitative methods follows.

## **Rationale for Qualitative Methodology**

Among differing research methodologies, qualitative inquiry may be best suited for gauging the effects of relational therapy at GBA. Though any method has its advantages and disadvantages, qualitative methods can enrich psychotherapy research because they allow types of data to be gathered that cannot be gathered through quantitative methods. Qualitative methods allow for this type of data collection because these methods are premised on different assumptions regarding epistemology, applied language, generalization, and the governance of human behavior than are quantitative methods (Slife & Gantt, 1999). Summarizing these four assumptions, coupled with the consequences each bears on psychotherapy research, is intended to clarify the benefits of utilizing qualitative methods in this study.

**Epistemology.** First, qualitative and quantitative researchers differ in their basic epistemological stances. Slife and Gantt (1999), indicate that quantitative researchers assume empiricism by only validating so-called objective data. They define objective data as that which is observable and measurable. Though all experience, including sensory experience, is accessed subjectively, empiricists' epistemology conventionally considers sensory data "objective." Westerman (2005) suggests that "[k]nowledge that is complete, determinate, and objective is the kind of understanding an investigator could aspire to if he or she were a removed observer" (p. 31). Yet, he contends that "[i]nvestigators do not put together their accounts from a removed vantage point. Rather, they learn about what people do as members of a culture who, themselves, are participants in the practices they are trying to understand better" (p. 31). Accordingly, qualitative researchers consider all experiences to be interpreted, made meaningful by the interpreter and from within their interpretive context.



This qualitative stance, that all experience is actively and contextually interpreted, has several implications. It opens a full range of human experiences (e.g., mental, emotional, spiritual) to be considered as valid with no need to operationalize these experiences into measurable sensory data (Slife & Gantt, 1999). Meaning-laden interpretations are impoverished when they are reduced to a numerical representation. This stance also necessitates a relationship between the researcher and the research subject. The researcher does not consider him or herself objectively independent, but as acting in relationship with the subject. Research findings are derived from a lived experience between the researcher and subject (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Consequently, qualitative researchers assume their research to be value-laden and socially dependent, whereas quantitative researchers often consider their research to be value-free.

Qualitative methods seem uniquely suited for investigating psychotherapy given that therapy is a living interchange between two or more interpretive beings. In reviewing the history of psychotherapy Krugar (1986) argues that therapy is quite clearly a socially dependent, meaning-laden experience, and that the process of psychotherapy clearly “parallels” (p. 203) a non-experimental, phenomenological approach to research. Similarly, Fischer (2006) has noted that qualitative methods are best suited for “lived world actions and meanings. [When] our access to the lived world is through our own subjectivity--our being subjects: beings who take action, reflect, experience, plan, hope, and so on” (p. xvi). This is consistent with relational therapy’s basic assumption that people, including social researchers, are basically interdependent, and that even research is a value-laden, interpretive enterprise.

**Language.** Second, quantitative and qualitative researchers differ in the language their research employs. Quantitative data and results rely on the language of numbers (e.g., scoring a 5/7 on a depression scale) and quantitative researchers argue that the resulting numerical patterns

give legitimacy to their research. Further, some quantitative researchers contend that qualitative results are unreliable and less scientific than quantitative findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, contend that not all experience can be adequately described through the language of numbers. These researchers make the claim that asking participants to respond using their ordinary language, the language of description and interpretation, results in data less removed from experience than asking the participant to respond in the “foreign language of numbers” (Slife & Gantt, 1999, p. 1459). In other words, numbers are seen as abstracting human experience, leading to important information being distorted or left out. For example, the person who scored a 5/7 on the depression scale may reveal through his own ordinary language the unique, felt experience of his depressive symptoms. This description would be grounded in the shared every day language of the client and researcher, and this descriptive data is arguably less abstract than the number “5” on the depression scale.

**Generalization.** Third, qualitative and quantitative researchers differ in their assumptions regarding generalization. Denzin & Lincoln (2003) contend that qualitative research is directed towards the participant’s point of view, which may be case-specific and not universally generalizable. The participants’ perspective is always assumed to come from within a deeply embedded context. In contrast, generalized statements (often the research conclusions) derived from quantitative data are assumed to stand above and outside the constraints of everyday life (Slife & Gantt, 1999).

From a relational perspective, this assumption is problematic, as even the language of numbers has a larger historical and situational context. Thus, presuming that some generalized conclusions stand independent of this context is problematic. Presumably then, relationality is more consistent with the thickly contextual, qualitative approach to research. While from this

perspective universal generalization is not possible, perhaps a different type of generalization is attainable. Slife & Gantt (1999) explain the value of positioning qualitative findings within a larger whole.

Indeed, from within the qualitative framework, it is *expected* that *some* knowledge is thoroughly cultural, historical, and thus unique and singular. As parts of the whole, these singularities are somewhat reflective of the whole and thus generalizable, after a fashion, without needing to assume universalism. (p. 1459, authors' emphasis retained)

**Meaning.** Fourth, qualitative and quantitative researchers differ in their assumptions regarding the governance of human behavior. Quantitative researchers often adopt naturalism, the assumption that unchanging, universal laws govern all of nature, including human behavior (Slife & Gantt, 1999). When this assumption is adopted, the pursuit of psychological science (and the experimental methods employed therein) is to discover the natural laws assumed to be determining human behavior. Said another way, psychotherapy researchers who adopt the assumption of naturalism in their experimental methods intend to reveal the lawful, causal pathways of behavior.

Slife and Gantt (1999) contend that genuine meaning cannot be ascribed to human behavior that is determined by natural law. Natural law is taken to be the fundamental, unyielding causal force assumed to be dictating all human functioning. As such, naturalism inevitably leads to determinism, wherein behavioral events are taken to be the necessary byproducts of particular causal conditions. For example, when a researcher presumes behavioral laws govern behavior then a person's reinforcement history determines his or her behaviors. There can be no inherent meaning in these determined behaviors. Slife and Gantt (1999) further illustrate this concept: "A rock rolling down a hillside cannot reasonably be said to have any

meaning or purpose in its ‘behavior,’ because its behavior is dictated by the forces of gravity and terrain” (p. 1460). There can be no genuine meaning to an event that is governed by natural law because the event is merely a function of the laws that control it.

Behaviors are genuinely meaningful if a person can do otherwise (Slife & Gantt, 1999). A husband’s kiss is meaningful if this action was not simply dictated by causal forces. Qualitative researchers assume people have genuine possibilities. Exploration of meaning is possible given this agentic assumption of human nature. In fact, qualitative exploration of human experience is, in an important sense, just that, an exploration of human meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Slife & Gantt, 1999).

The accessibility of meaning exploration in qualitative psychotherapy research is consequential. Krugar (1986) contends that even traditional psychotherapies are primarily meaning oriented. “The psychotherapeutic approaches of Freud, Jung, and Rogers to name but a few, all center around the meaning of symptoms and how these are comprehensible in terms of life history and current goals” (p. 204). Strong relational psychotherapy is arguably more radically meaning-oriented, considering its hermeneutic foundations. The deterministic assumptions of traditional quantitative methods handicap researchers ability to investigate such meaning. From the outset, quantitative assumptions disallow the possibility of genuine meaning, instead presuming and searching for causal pathways of behavior. Whereas qualitative research is uniquely positioned to explore the experiential meaning generally valued by psychotherapists. This is perhaps especially valuable to relational psychotherapists.

In their seminal text on qualitative methodology, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) aptly summarize the differences between qualitative and quantitative methods:

Qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency . . . stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. . . . In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Proponents of such studies claim that their work is done within a value-free framework. (p. 12)

These assumptions of quantitative research are consistent with a positivist philosophy of science. This philosophy emphasizes the utility of *the* scientific method to uncover the laws of nature. This presumes that by carefully utilizing this method a scientist can objectively expose the causal pathways operating to make nature ‘lawful.’ Relationists would certainly question this presumption. Alternatively, qualitative researchers are well positioned to access the *human* and *relational* elements of psychotherapy because they utilize ordinary, meaning-laden language to enter clients’ lived and uniquely situated experiences.

Given this overview of the assumptions common to qualitative research, the reader might be misled into thinking that qualitative inquiry is a single enterprise. In truth, qualitative research is no more a single enterprise than quantitative research. Both broad methodologies include a wide grouping of a variety of differing methods and procedures, each with differing techniques and aims.

Particularly well-established among qualitative researchers, much as perhaps experimental methods are established among quantitative researchers, are grounded theory methods developed by Glaser and Strauss (1965, 1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998).

These researchers define grounded theory methods as an inductive approach to studying a particular phenomenon. According to Strauss and Corbin, a grounded theory is “inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon” (1990, p. 23). Unlike quantitative methods that purport to test researchers’ a priori hypothesized theories, grounded theory methods derive their theories directly from raw qualitative data (i.e. qualitative interviews, field notes, or direct observations of phenomenon). In other words, a grounded theory is produced from the particulars of the data that are carefully analyzed, reasoned, and organized towards coherent and holistic meanings. Importantly, the theory that evolves from this process should remain closely tied to the phenomenon under investigation. This is ensured by an iterative research process involving continued interplay between data collection and data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Grounded theory methodology has been critiqued for a number of reasons, some of which are particularly salient to the current study. In particular, the tacit assumption that the grounded theory researcher remain neutral such that the results of this research are purely inductive, derive wholly from the data, seems problematic from a relational standpoint. Rather, a relationist would argue that the researcher is inextricably related to the data and that the researcher actively interprets with his/her own preconceptions and assumptions. This suggests some necessary modifications to grounded theory that make explicit the active role of the researcher. These modifications will be detailed later.

This study was concerned with uniquely situated persons (adolescent female students at GBA) and their experience of relational treatment. There is some precedent for utilizing grounded theory methods to investigate clients’ experience in other therapeutic treatment

settings. The following section will review a number of studies that have utilized a variety of qualitative methods to investigate treatment effects. This literature review found grounded theory methods to be the most common qualitative methodology employed. While this may partly reflect the strong establishment of grounded theory in qualitative methods generally, it may also indicate the utility of these methods for synthesizing the experience and meaning of psychotherapy.

### **Related Qualitative Research**

While GBA is distinct in its explicit relational foundation, other therapeutic interventions have previously been evaluated using qualitative methodology. Yet the relative number of qualitative outcome studies is few (Mcleod, 2000; Hill, Chui, & Baumann, 2013). A search of the PsychINFO database for articles published between 1905 and 2013, using search terms including psychotherapy, qualitative methods, grounded theory, process, outcome, and effectiveness yielded a few dozen results. In contrast to these few qualitative studies, there is an enormous body of quantitative studies examining the effectiveness of various therapeutic interventions. A brief review of the meta-analytic reviews listed in Bergin and Garfield's Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change (Lambert, 2004) illustrates this. For instance, Clum's (1989) meta-analysis specific to panic and agoraphobia treatments included 283 quantitative outcome studies. And Hegarty, Baldessarini, Tohen, Wateraux, and Oepen (1994) reviewed 320 quantitative outcome studies exclusive to schizophrenia treatments. The above examples are sampled from the approximately 120 meta-analyses included in Lambert's handbook, though not all meta-analyses listed include an equally large number of outcome studies. Notably, there is a complete absence of qualitative studies in Lambert's reviews as is also the case in other major reviews of treatment efficacy (see, for example, Roth & Fonagy,

1996). This illustrates the convention in psychotherapy research that quantitative methods are the best and almost the only way to measure the effectiveness of psychotherapy (McLeod, 2000).

**Mixed methods studies.** A handful of studies have combined qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the effects of psychotherapy. For example, Stephen, Elliot, and Macleod (2011) investigated the effects of Person-centered therapy using a Hermeneutic Single Case Efficacy Design. Employing this mixed methods approach these researchers employed a hermeneutic process to make sense of “complex and often-contradictory information” in a single case outcome study. These authors contrasted this approach against prevalent approaches of investigating outcome using randomized control trials, commonly viewed as the ‘gold standard’ for examining the efficacy of psychotherapy. Stephen, Elliott, & Macleod argued that “a key problem is that in RTCs [randomized control trials] it is difficult to capture the complexity and subtlety of the therapy process.” (2011, p. 57).

Stephen, Elliott, and Macleod (2011) administered five standardized tests pre-, mid-, and post-therapy. Only two of these measures suggested reliable positive change in the client. In contrast to the ambiguous results of these questionnaires, the client qualitatively reported positive changes, including being more aware and accepting of her difficulties, allowing herself to be more vulnerable and open in relationships, and being able to manage a difficult personal relationship. The client reported that these changes were “extremely” (p. 61) important and were “unlikely” (p. 61) to have happened without therapy. Using a hermeneutic analysis of the combined data, the researchers concluded that the client had changed “considerably” (p. 63) during therapy, and that the positive change was “considerably” (p. 63) due to therapy.

Finucane and Mercer (2006) used both quantitative and qualitative methods to study the effects of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for anxious and depressed patients. Pre- and post-



Beck depression and anxiety inventory scores revealed statistically significant quantitative outcomes. In general, the results from both the quantitative and qualitative methods corresponded well, as this study's qualitative data also suggested that clients generally benefited from treatment. However, the qualitative investigation (using a framework approach) yielded information not captured by the Beck inventories. For instance, these methods revealed that most participants felt the course of treatment was too short and that follow-up could have been useful. Other qualitative data revealed aspects of treatment deemed particularly helpful like the "normalising and validating experience" (p. 10) of being in a therapeutic group. Of being in a group, one man said, "Don't ask me what I was expecting people to be . . . raving lunatics, people with axes in their hands—I haven't a clue . . . but they were not . . . they were just ordinary everyday run of the mill people which reinforces the fact that that is what I am as well . . . and that was a great plus" (Finuncane & Mercer, 2006, p. 6).

Lafave, Desportes, and McBride (2009) also used mixed methods, but to examine the effectiveness of a women's substance abuse treatment program using quantitative and qualitative methods. The results from both the interview and the survey indicate that participants experienced positive changes as a result of therapy. The details of these changes were best clarified through the study's qualitative data. One woman said in an interview that before therapy she "had no emotions whatever. I couldn't cry. I didn't know how to feel love, but by the time I left here, I knew it. And I knew how to receive it" (p. 62). Other women expressed that they felt the benefit of learning to not always feel responsible for the actions of others. Most notably, however, was that every participant mentioned feeling an increased ability to make choices-- prior to treatment they indicated feeling trapped in their substance abuse patterns and/or destructive relationships. One woman said, "The program showed that it's [my] choice whether

[I] wanted to be sober or stay an alcoholic. That was the hardest thing I had to learn, but I learned to make my own choice” (p. 58).

In each of these mixed methods studies, the researchers found the qualitative methods to compliment, contextualize, or reconsider the quantitative findings. These studies illustrate some of the benefits of using qualitative methods in gauging treatment outcome, including the ability to illuminate the salient and impactful meanings of treatment for clients. McLeod (2000) noted that these meanings are important, because they allow clinicians and other readers to understand both *how* therapy operated and *why* therapy is helpful or not.

**Qualitative studies using grounded theory methods.** Of the few qualitative outcome studies that were found, several utilized mixed methods, incorporating quantitative methods along side the qualitative methods of grounded theory. However, others exclusively relied on grounded theory qualitative methods. A brief review of some of the data extracted by grounded theory in these studies is presented here, providing the reader a sampling of the information attainable using this approach.

The use of grounded theory in Wakeling, Webster, and Mann’s (2005) mixed methods study on a treatment program for sexual offenders revealed both positive and negative aspects of therapy for the participants—the negative aspects of therapy being something not captured by their quantitative measure. In response to being asked to describe the experience of the program, the majority of participants responded with mixed (both positive and negative) feelings. For instance, while one category of positive change revealed in the interviews was that of gaining greater respect for and acceptance of others, negative categories included over-sized groups, unhelpful tutors, and cultural barriers. These negative themes were not captured in the

quantitative measure, further illustrating *how* and *why* therapy was both helpful and unhelpful (Wakeling et al., 2005).

Other studies, using only grounded theory qualitative methods, further aid in fleshing out the meaningful aspects of therapeutic change for clients. For instance, after participating in a mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression, Mason and Hargreaves (2001) found that one of the core categories of client experience was finding a group format for therapy helpful. Speaking of her group experience, one woman said “they [her group members] are all ordinary people, you know, they are you and me . . . that helped enormously” (p. 204). In addition to positive categories that emerged, several negative categories were also discovered. For instance, regarding the early stages of therapy, one woman’s unrealistic expectations led her to say, “I just felt I wasn’t able to do what I was supposed to do” (Mason & Hargreaves, 2001, p. 203). In this situation, understanding the negative reactions clients have would be useful in considering adjustments to improve the therapy program.

Quick and Gizzo (2007) investigated the effectiveness of a group treatment program for anxiety, depression, and various other difficulties. Using grounded theory qualitative methods, Quick and Gizzo found some commonalities in the clients’ responses from which they drew broader theories. Specifically, some clients’ conceptions of their problems did not match the more traditional diagnosis-specific conceptualizations of treatment providers. When the participants were asked which area of their lives they would like to create positive change, the most frequent response was that of relationships. This response was twice as frequent as the second common response, depression. This was despite the fact that many of these clients had previously received diagnoses (e.g., depression, anxiety). Yet more clients seemed to think of their problems in non-diagnostic terms. The authors noted that this may suggest that the more

diagnosis-specific and diagnosis-targeted the treatment, the less likely treatment will fit with the client's conception of his or her problem.

The grounded theory results of Collins, Brown, and Lennings (2010) suggest, along with a previous study by Day (1999), that interpersonal factors are more important in bringing about therapeutic change than the actual content of this treatment program. In fact, interpersonal factors were a pervasive theme as the clients reflected on their own experience of change when the interviews were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. One client, for instance, made reference to the importance of having a same-sex facilitator due to the sensitive nature of dealing with a sexual offense committed by a man towards a woman (Collins et al., 2010). This study illustrates how grounded theory is beneficial in discovering, according to the criteria employed by clients themselves, why and how psychotherapy might be helpful, as opposed to reducing therapeutic change to responses on set of pre-selected standardized assessment measures.

### **Purpose of the Present Investigation**

Unique from the studies just reviewed, the purpose of this hermeneutically modified grounded theory study was to explore the relational experiences and change processes for eight adolescent females whom I interviewed and observed at GBA. Primarily, I intended to understand how the students, themselves, characterize their experience within Greenbrier Academy, and their therapeutic change with respect to relationality. Greenbrier Academy claims relationality as its guiding ethic and this study's purpose is to explore whether students' lived experience and therapeutic change match this claim. The following research questions also helped guide this qualitative inquiry. The first three questions especially helped guide the interviews I conducted with the students themselves, though I used more conversational language. (A general outline utilized for this interview is available as the Appendix to this

dissertation.) All five research questions were relevant for consideration during the data analysis process.

- What experiential change processes are operating for GBA's students?
- Is the students' experience at GBA effectively promoting relational change?
- If so, how are the students' experiencing themselves as thinking, acting, and pursuing more virtuous relations?
- How is the students' change consistent with or different from the ten features of relationality as delineated by Slife & Wiggins (2009)?
- Are GBA's relational interventions countering individualism, including the assumptions of hedonism, reductionism, and value-freedom? If so, how?

## **Method**

### **Overview of Methodology**

The present study utilized a modified grounded theory methodology. Addison (1998) explains how a study's research method should match the problem being investigated:

In part, the choice of a method of investigation depends on the problem to be investigated. The method chosen must fit the problem and goal of the investigation. In part, the choice of a method and the perception, definition, and framing of the problem also depend on the researcher's preunderstanding of the world. (p. 40)

Grounded theory has shown itself to be successful at exploring the effects of therapeutic treatment, and the modifications suggested herein bring this study into closer theoretical consistency with relational ontology. As discussed, relational ontology is central to the research purposes and questions. A hermeneutic framework, intended to acknowledge the interpretive role of the researcher and avoid a mere technical application of grounded theory methods, informed

the modifications made to grounded theory herein. Addison (1999) argues that a general and basic objective of any qualitative analysis is to “make sense out of or bring some comprehensible and illuminating order to the complex set of human practices and interrelationships that are usually the object of inquiry of qualitative research” (p. 146). Similarly, according to Palmer (1969) the central task of hermeneutic analysis is to bring a phenomenon into greater understanding or clarity. This goal parallels a hermeneutic conception of a basic aspect of our being in the world—trying to understand, derive meaning, or making intelligible that which is not yet understood (Gadamer, 1976; Heidegger, 1927/1962).

Addison (1999) purports that while hermeneutics and grounded theory share several things in common, they are also clearly divergent in some basic ways. He claims that grounded theory is often employed very technically, without “regard to researchers’ assumptions and practices to adequately incorporate reflexivity” (p. 149). Similarly, Ashworth (1997) fears that a technical application of grounded theory moves qualitative research into the realm of positivist science, becoming mechanistic not unlike experimentation. As has been discussed, to study relationality using positivist methods (not unlike quantitative methods) would limit understanding as to fit within a naturalistic scientific framework. This typically means presuming that phenomena are objectifiable and can be causally sequenced.

However, Addison (1989; 1999) argues that by acknowledging the positivists’ limitations of grounded theory this methodology can be adjusted to be of particular value. He employs what he terms a “grounded hermeneutic approach” (1989, p. 149) to his qualitative research, expressly avoiding an inflexible, prescribed set of techniques. He sees this research as taking advantage of the “constant comparative analytic method of grounded theory, on a more comprehensive

hermeneutic framework” (p. 149). Following Addison’s lead, the methods of this project could also be termed a grounded hermeneutic approach.

What follows is a comparison of some of the basic assumptions and practices of grounded theory in light of a larger hermeneutic theoretical framework. From this comparison come some modifications to grounded theory that informed the methods of this study. These modifications are aimed at avoiding many of the positivist pitfalls of adhering to a more mechanistic approach to grounded theory research.

**Hermeneutic circle.** Glaser and Strauss suggest that the researcher “jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data” (1967, p. 45), meaning that these steps cannot be distinctly separated, but rather are interrelated and revolving. This circular approach is clearly more hermeneutic than positivist, as the steps of grounded theory research are not approached in a rigid linear fashion. However, in many of their writings, the grounded theory building process seems to remain fairly disconnected and linearly sequenced.

Applying the hermeneutic circle throughout a grounded theory investigation helps take seriously Glaser and Strauss’s recommendation to incorporate a reciprocal process. Packer and Addison (1989) explain that this occurs through constant dialogue—a researcher’s perspective is always followed by an evaluation or reflection. For example, Addison (1989) suggests that before beginning an investigation researchers ought to first become as clear as possible about their assumptions, and as the research proceeds these assumptions may be challenged, supported, or adjusted. Additional, previously unnoticed, assumptions may be brought to the forefront. “So in effect my assumptions become clearer or more fleshed out as the circular movement spirals on” (p. 147). Similarly, while an investigator may employ a particular investigative methodology, the procedures will likely be modified and refined on an ongoing basis as data is

collected. In this circular fashion, the researcher's developing analysis help inform the methodology itself.

Packer (1985) aptly summarizes the utilization of this hermeneutic circle within the research process:

[A] unique characteristic of hermeneutic inquiry is its openly dialogical nature; the returning to the object of inquiry again and again, each time with an increased understanding and more complete interpretive account. An initial understanding becomes refined and corrected by the work of interpretation; fresh questions are raised and can be answered only by returning to the events studied and revising the interpretations. (p. 1091)

Thus, the hermeneutic circle is a process of clarifying and refining one's understanding of a phenomenon by inviting dialogue throughout the research process. This circular dialogue emphasizes a reflection on the totality of meaning, wherein parts of the data are always viewed in relation to the whole.

**Constant comparison.** Engaging in hermeneutic reflection arguably leads to what grounded theory researchers term *constant comparison* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Indeed, Addison (1989) contends that both grounded theory and hermeneutic analysis are constantly comparative. This means that researchers adopt a critical stance by perpetually questioning inconsistencies, omissions, and contradictions as they gather and analyze their data. As a researcher this practice is critical to the scientific integrity of my results, helping to avoid confirmatory bias.

Application of constant comparison in my study occurred throughout, on both an individual and collaborative level. For example, as I collected interviews I returned to a



previously interviewed student to explore some topics and questions further. I also repeatedly reviewed my data to explore unanswered questions. Beyond my own questioning and re-examining of data, I collaborated with my chair and other colleagues to seek out and explore the meaning of disjunctive data.

**Contextually particular.** In situating their research, grounded theorists emphasize the importance of context and sociality. For example, a phenomena is studied within its own context and this context directly informs the developing theory. However, grounded theorists' also use mechanistic terms like causal conditions, consequences, contingencies and causes in describing social and situational interactions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Addison (1999) argues that these terms suggest a mechanistic thinning of these contexts. Positioning context as reducible to simple mechanics may further lead to positivist accounts and may inhibit a researcher from conceptualizing things as deeply and thoroughly relational. In contrast, hermeneutic thought presumes no such mechanistic reduction of context. Likewise, data collected in the present study is presumed to be irreducibly embedded in a thick historical and situational context.

The results of research are consequentially affected by considering all data to be contextually particular. Results are considered uniquely related to this context. As such, grounded and hermeneutic qualitative researchers both conceptualize their results as fluid rather than rigidly fixed (Addison, 1989; Corbin and Strauss, 1990). In turn, a grounded theory must be applied dynamically, rather than abstractly. This application will be explored in more depth in discussing the generalization of results.

**Lived experience.** Addison (1989) contends that grounded theorists do not often feel it necessary to observe actual practices and lived experience. Rather, he claims that a grounded

theory is derived solely from participants' attitudes and beliefs as derived from interviews. This critique may be somewhat short sighted as many grounded theorists certainly incorporate observational data, and grounded theorists generally value the descriptive accounts of practices and experiences found in their interviews.

From a hermeneutic perspective, lived experience takes strong preference and can be obtained through both observation and interview. Both sources of data were utilized in the present study. While interviewing, I was especially interested in hearing life examples and stories from my participants to ground data within their lived experience.

**Co-constitutive.** Traditional grounded theorists consider their research process to be wholly inductive; such that the theories are derived from data alone. Assuming this, grounded theorists are apt to describe their results as *emergent*. This assumption was held particularly strong by Glaser and was later deemphasized by Strauss and Corbin (Glaser, 1992; Rennie, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In fact, Strauss and Corbin (1990) diverged from original writings on grounded theory by explicitly discussing the role of interpretation in grounded theory methods.

From a hermeneutic perspective, it would be problematic to assume strict induction. A hermeneuticist sees the research process as co-constitutive—the researcher always enters a project with assumptions and preconceptions that affect the research process itself. From a hermeneutic perspective, theory cannot just be built from the bottom up, but in a dialogical manner that involves reflection and interaction with the researcher. As a researcher, I should seek clarity and explicitness about my own assumptions and role within a project, rather than to assume that independence or objectivity. According to Addison (1989), one of the most problematic shortcomings of grounded theory is when a researcher's involvement is not acknowledged, in favor of calling a study's resulting theory wholly emergent.

**Objectivity.** As an interpretive agent with my own values and biases, I embarked on this research acknowledging certain preconceived biases and assumptions. Because I do not assume myself to be value-free, I did not seek objectivity by claiming to escape my values. A different type of objectivity was sought. As a part of the research process, I explicitly acknowledged my biases held at the outset and held these biases tentatively. Additionally, I remained open to the contradiction or violation of my biases throughout the investigation.

As the researcher, I was an integral part of the investigation and was actively engaged in a relationship with each participant and within the very context of study (in this case GBA). As such I acknowledge my influence on participant's responses, on the data deemed important to be recorded, and on the very context I was engaged within. Written notes helped me, as the researcher, take responsibility for my interpretive role. These allowed me to trace the flow of ideas, conceptualizations, and reactions that I had during the research process. Grounded theory requires that analysis take place during the data collection process. As my assumptions were violated during this process, changes to my methodology were indicated.

### **Researcher's Assumptions**

Considering my assumptions and preconceptions explicitly from the outset is critical to having these affirmed or violated throughout the project. In preparing for this project, the literature review increased my overall knowledge base of the research topic. I came to conceptualize cultural individualism as both systemic and fairly problematic. Furthermore, my review better clarified alternatives to individualistic assumptions, including relationality. It may be relevant to note that my interest in relational ontology and psychotherapy began prior to this literature review. As a clinical psychology doctoral student I also received a year of training and supervision in practicing relational psychotherapy, from my dissertation chair. As a training

clinician, my therapeutic approach continues to be, in large part, informed by this philosophy. This means that in practice I approach clients with the assumption that relationships matter deeply and that therapy itself is a relational experience. Furthermore, I seek to hold assumptions about clients tentatively, curiously seeking to understand these persons from within a deep and complex relational context. Relationality influences my conceptualization of what is helpful in practice, finding myself broadly concerned with the manner a client engages in relationships. Given my general aim to practice in a relational manner, I also note my experiential bias towards this approach as clinically helpful.

Additionally, the research methodology of this project reflects particular assumptions about ontology and epistemology. As has been described, relationality assumes human life to be fundamentally bound up in relationships. Accordingly, knowledge claims can be defined as fundamentally bound up in relationships. Qualitative methods, more than quantitative methods, seem to allow space for understanding human life as richly detailed, deeply contextual, and intimately relational. Importantly, adoption of these methods does not prevent an integral investigation of the change experienced by students at GBA. In fact, qualitative methods allow for a broad openness to contradiction and contraindication. Unlike how quantitative methods typically restrict a participant's responses to fit within pre-defined options, qualitative methods allow participants to respond using their own words and consistent with their own experience. As described below, I entered this project with an expressed openness to such challenges. This is particularly important given my assumption that qualitative researchers are actively interpretive rather than distantly removed and objective. This prompts an ongoing questioning and refining of my interpretations and conclusions in dialogue with my participants, data, and colleagues.

As has been mentioned, I entered the situated context of this research with particular preconceptions. Though I had not visited and experienced GBA first hand before the interviews took place, the particular perceptions I held about the school were explicitly acknowledged. Given my bias towards relationality I entered this investigation with a general appreciation for this program's aim to apply relational ontology in a comprehensive manner at the school. Additionally, I had heard generally positive accounts of their program from my chair and from staff members at the program itself. My interactions through phone and email with some of the programs staff were positive, as they were welcoming of my research and very responsive to my requests for information.

Understanding that my assumptions affect the research process, including data collection and analysis, it is relevant that these assumptions be acknowledged explicitly with an expressed openness to violations of these assumptions. This acknowledgement was part of an ongoing attempt to remain aware of my assumptions and how they impact this study. The integrity of this project also depended on my willingness to have my assumptions challenged or contradicted. It was helpful, then, that I carefully looked for instances of disconfirmation in my data as will be reflected in the results of this study.

### **Data Collection**

Two types of data were collected for the present investigation: interview and observational. These labels were applied for ease of differentiation and do not denote distinct categorical differences in the data gathered. In fact, all of the data gathered could be considered experiential, as this data are samples of the lived experience of the students within GBA.

**Interviews.** As introduced above, eight students were interviewed using a flexible outline (see Appendix), during my visit at GBA. These interviews sought to elaborate on the change

processes as perceived and experienced by the academy's students. A flexible, outlined format allowed for targeting specific areas important to the research questions, but remained open for elaboration and exploration. Similarly, this format allowed the students to share the most salient details of their experience at GBA. Students were asked open-ended questions with opportunity for full explanation in their own words and for follow-up inquiry. I sought to remain open to changing both the sequence and content of my questions in response to the unique interview process with each student. The intent was for the students to begin to describe the meaning of their experiences at GBA and the impact of treatment. Students were asked to describe their experiences, not analyze them.

Prior to each interview, I as the researcher allowed time to prepare. I made note of any reminders for myself to take into the interview and reviewed my general outline. Additionally, I ensured that my recording equipment was working and ready for the interview, as each of the interviews was audio-recorded. Importantly, I assessed that my own focus was centered on the interview itself as I entered into this experience. This served to manage my anxiety about doing the interview 'right.' Calming this anxiety allowed me to be present and authentic throughout each interview.

As the interviewer I entered a real relationship with those that I interviewed, and consequently I sought to build rapport with the students. Rapport helped build trust and facilitate open dialogue between myself and each student. I presumed that the most truthful data would be gathered as students trusted that they could speak candidly about their experiences. Rapport building began prior to commencing my interviews, as I interacted with students and the community as a whole while on campus. I attempted to assume a transparent, non-defensive stance while on campus, welcoming students to ask any questions of me, and my reason for

being on campus. I was provided an opportunity to introduce myself, and my purpose on campus, during the first meal I shared with GBA's students the night I arrived. Throughout the week I continued to develop rapport as I sat with various students during meals and other activities, interacting openly and frequently with students.

Commencing each interview, each student and I engaged in casual conversation as we walked together to an office set aside for these interviews. As we talked I remained cognizant of establishing eye contact, showing genuine curiosity about the student and their experience, and sharing an authentic, warm interpersonal experience. Kvale (1996) advises, "it is up to the interviewer to create in a short time a contact that allows the interaction to get beyond merely a polite conversation or exchange of ideas. [The interviewee must feel] safe enough to talk freely about his or her experiences and feelings" (p. 125). Openness about my research purposes and an explanation of the confidentiality of their interview was helpful in establishing this rapport and trust.

I reviewed the consent form with students, though the students had a chance to read this prior to beginning their interview. The basic details of this consent form were reviewed, giving the students a chance to ask any questions or address any concerns. The students were reminded that these interviews were to be recorded and of the purpose of the recording in order to help the student feel at ease about this aspect of the experience.

To introduce the purpose of each interview I conveyed to the students that I would like to understand how they see the world, particularly in regards to their treatment experience at GBA. I wanted to understand the meaning of their experiences, to walk in their shoes, and to see things from their perspective. To help me with this I was particularly interested in hearing stories about their experiences during and before treatment at GBA.

During each interview, I took brief notes recording my impressions, observations, and personal reminders. I prepared the students for this by letting them know the purpose of my note taking, anticipating potential concerns students may have during the interview.

Following each interview, I allowed time for reflecting on the interview itself. During this reflection I made additional notes, clarified the notes that I had written, listened to segments of the recorded interview, and considered how the data that had been gathered could inform future interviews and improve upon the study moving forward.

**Transcriptions.** Later, each interview was transcribed to aid in the data analysis process. Six research assistants aided in the transcription of this study's nine qualitative interviews. Each research assistant attended three training sessions to help ensure their work's overall consistency and quality. During the first training session, the primary researcher provided basic transcription instructions. Research assistants were trained to carefully transcribe the word-for-word interview dialogue as well as noticeable voice inflections, pauses, and other non-word sounds, particularly those that affected the meaning of the dialogue. For example, if a phrase was said with particular emphasis this segment was italicized, followed by a bracketed explanation of these italics. An excerpt from one of the transcriptions helps to illustrate this approach:

Student: Once I started like being here longer I realized there was something that I was good at, I just hadn't figured it out yet? And then once I did, *it was just like* [relieved inflection] 'Okay, like now I know what I'm doing!'

Transcribers were also trained to use punctuation and formatting in a generally consistent manner. Finally, a short segment (about 3 minutes) of one interview was used for practice during this initial training session, wherein each transcriber compared their practice transcription against a prepared transcription provided by the primary researcher.



All transcribers were asked to come prepared to the second training session having transcribed the first 10-minutes of the same interview used for practice in the first training session. Each transcription was examined for accuracy and consistency against a transcription prepared by the primary researcher. Differences in style, punctuation usage, and textual emphases were discussed as a group to help achieve consistency between transcribers. Transcribers were not expected to achieve perfect uniformity. However, they were asked to make every effort to transcribe accurately and preserve the meaning of the dialogue with their textual emphases. In addition to examining their prepared transcriptions as a group, the researcher provided transcribers any necessary individual feedback based on his evaluation of their work. Two transcribers seemed to have particular difficulty with the 10-minute training segment and were asked to submit additional samples of their work, before proceeding to transcribe a complete interview.

During a final training session, each research assistant was trained to use a Microsoft Word template for completing their assigned transcriptions. Templates included a form for inputting the interview dialogue and a header to record the transcribers' names and the dates and times of when the work of transcription was completed. To aid in performing quality checks, a time stamp was placed near the top of each transcription page in reference to the audio recording of the interview. Additional guidelines were also discussed to guide the transcribers' work, such as how to note obvious and meaningful changes in a speaker's tone of voice during an interview. The researcher provided ongoing quality checks, trainings, and feedback with each assistant throughout the transcription process.

With one exception, two research assistants transcribed each of the nine interviews. One person from each partnership did the initial transcription and then met with his or her partner to

review the transcript together while listening to the recorded interview in its entirety. During this quality check the partners were asked to pay particular attention to significant nuances in speaking patterns that seemed to affect the meaning of the interview dialogue. After this initial quality check, the primary researcher collaborated with the transcribers to perform spot checks on each interview. Audio segments of approximately one minute each were compared against the transcription to ensure quality work. While minor changes were made to particular segments, none of these changes were of significant concern or suggested that the transcripts required additional review.

The exception to this general transcription process was with the interview, referenced above, that was initially used for practice and quality checks. The final transcription of this interview is a synthesis of each transcriber's work on the first 10 minutes (synthesized by the primary researcher), an initial rough transcription done in entirety (while practicing, one of the transcribers misunderstood the instruction to transcribe only the first 10 minutes of this interview, and roughly transcribed the entire interview), a second complete review of the initial transcription, and a final quality check done with two transcribers (including the primary researcher) in usual form.

Kvale (1996) cautions about the reduction that can take place in transcribing a living conversation to written form. The resulting transcript may become a detached collection of words removed from the face-to-face conversation of the lived interview. It may become fragmented into discontinuous quotes or meaning units, without clear integration into the greater whole of the interview. Doing so may severely impoverish the meanings available for exploration within the interview. Kvale suggests,

An alternative approach toward transcripts involves entering into a dialogue with the text, going into an imagined conversation with the author about the meaning of the text. The reader here asks about the theme of the text, goes into the text seeking to develop, clarify, and expand what is expressed in the text. The meanings may be approached as manifestly expressed, or, in line with a ‘depth hermeneutics,’ seeking to uncover meanings hidden in the text. The alternative to the transcription emphasis . . . is: How do I analyze what my interviewees told me in order to enrich and deepen the meaning of what they said? (pp. 182-183)

Heeding Kvale’s suggestion required that I enter into dialogue with the transcripts while referencing notes from the lived experience of the interview. Kvale (1996) further warns that to analyze qualitative data denotes the idea of fragmenting this text into smaller parts or elements. In contrast, to narrate an interview is to consider the interview holistically, as an indivisible story. He suggests that a narrative analysis requires asking the question “How can I reconstruct the original story told to me by the interviewee into a story I want to tell my audience?”

**Observational data.** As other qualitative researchers have noted, attending only to what people say can neglect much of our unspoken lived experience (Addison, 1999; Bellah et al., 1985). Responding to this point, I recorded intermittent observational data for six days’ while onsite at GBA. In fact my observations began when I arrived at the nearby airport, where the school’s headmaster greeted me and a number of students who had also serendipitously returned from visits home on the same flight as me. My experiences throughout my visit were recorded in narrative form—meaning that I recorded descriptions of the activities, dialogues, exchanges, and behaviors including my impressions of these details. I sought to fully participate in the programming, engaging from within the program as an active participant. Unlike quantitative

methods, the goal was not to objectively collect data from a distance. I sought to become engaged in the program, allowing for brief, experiential access to (Kazdin, 2003) students experience at GBA. This approach yielded observations of how students act in their daily living at GBA.

My engagement within the program included observations during school, recreational activities, therapeutic groups, a parent tour, community meetings, meals, and unstructured time. Observations were noted on an ongoing basis by recording quotations, nonverbal actions and interactions, my impressions, and any other salient details I observed. In addition to keeping notes on an ongoing basis, I took time after completion of a major activity (e.g., a community meeting) to continue my notes and reflect on these experiences.

After interviews had taken place the first three days I arrived at GBA, I took particular observational notice of the students who were interviewed. Noting their specific engagement in the daily programming, including their relational interactions, proved useful in understanding their treatment experience more completely.

Putting together observations of the daily activities at GBA, descriptions from the students, and impressions of myself as the interviewer in relating to the youth while interviewing, a more holistic and systematic perspective was achieved (Weiss, 1995) in assessing the treatment meaning and effects. The result being that this study shed light to the experiences from *within* the academy, accessing information from multiple domains.

### **Informed Consent and Confidentiality**

Greenbrier Academy students and their parents/guardians were informed about the reasons for the researcher to participate in daily programming and interview within the program. Assent forms were obtained from each interviewee while consent forms were obtained from their

parents/guardians. Participation in these interviews was entirely voluntary, and students were free to withdraw from an interview and the study at any time, without penalty. Additionally, students were assured full confidentiality as no participant's individual responses were shared with the program nor data shared that was linked to their individual names. As such, students' responses and recorded observations could not affect their status in the program (neither enhancing nor inhibiting their progress), allowing students to freely disclose.

### **Participants**

While students' are admitted to GBA with a variety of presenting concerns, the program does not admit a student if she is a danger to self or others, displays active psychotic symptoms, has an IQ significantly below average that could hinder her in succeeding in the academic work of the program, has a serious health condition that would prevent her from participating in the recreational activities of the program, or has parents/guardians that are not willing to participate in the family aspects of the program. Many of GBA's students had received treatment at other programs, while for some this represented their first treatment experience. Students are referred to the program through different means, many coming from educational consultants—professionals that work with parents to identify options for placement when a youth has significant problems at school, home, or elsewhere that require intensive intervention.

In contrast to the preferred randomized sampling technique of quantitative research, qualitative researchers are typically *purposeful* in selecting participants (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). From the approximate population of fifty students, eight students were chosen to interview based, in part, on their level of advancement through GBA's programming. The exact number of participants was not pre-determined. Rather this number was adjusted based on an ongoing reflection and evaluation of the interview data that was gathered while onsite. In other

words, the researcher spent time reviewing and interpreting the interview data as it was gathered to evaluate the need for additional data. While it is expected that additional data will always yield new details, the data set was considered complete when the general themes of these interviews became generally redundant. After reaching this I completed one more interview to confirm this thematic redundancy, what grounded theorists term *saturation* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

As one purpose of the present investigation was to evaluate the effectiveness of treatment, my sample predominately focused on females who had advanced considerably through the program. However, it was also useful to include a few students at earlier stages of treatment. While it is not assumed that a particular amount of time is required to achieve relational change, doing this was presumed to be helpful for drawing comparisons between students with varying treatment experience. Importantly, those who were more advanced were able to reflect back on a wealth of experience throughout treatment, as well as before starting the program. One way to gauge students' experiential exposure to relationality was based on their advancement through GBA's five relational aspirations. Students advance through these aspirations sequentially based on their demonstrating lived-embodiment of each aspiration. I interviewed students from each of the five relational aspirations, with an emphasis on those who had advanced towards those later aspirations. I interviewed two students each on the last three aspirations: Empathy and Forgiveness, Humility and Honor, and Trust. I interviewed only one student each, from the first two aspirations: Respect of Self and Others, and Courtesy and Compassion. Of the students I interviewed, time spent enrolled at GBA ranged from 2 to 23 months (namely: 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 21, and 23 months) with a mean of 10.25 months.

In addition to assessing the extent of students' exposure to relationality on campus, I selected participants who were treated by five of the program's different therapists and who came to the school with a variety of presenting concerns, ethnic backgrounds, and ages (the school accepts students between 13-18 years of age). Presenting concerns included conduct problems, somatic complaints, academic problems and failure, lack of motivation, substance abuse, abuse histories, disordered eating, isolation, concerns related to adoption, parental conflict, mood liability, relationship concerns, anxiety and diagnoses of Major Depression, Bipolar Disorder, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Of the students I interviewed, five students considered their ethnicity and cultural background to be Caucasian/American. The other three students considered their ethnicities to be Asian American, African American, and Ukrainian. Only the Ukrainian student disclosed that she had been, in part, raised outside of the United States. Students were ages 14 (1), 16 (4), 17 (2), and 18 (1). Diversity of ages, ethnicity, and presenting concerns was seen as helpful in yielding a variety of background and experience among participants and to demonstrate effectiveness of relationality for a variety of presenting concerns and backgrounds.

### **Data Analysis**

Interpretive analysis for this study was, in part, informed by the procedures set forth by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) for a grounded theory analysis. As organized below, Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin describe each type of grounded theory coding as its own distinct analytic process. However, taking a grounded *hermeneutic* approach, I did not intend to treat this analysis in such a step-wise, linear fashion. Rather, the application of these methods was used in a simultaneous and circular manner by applying different types of coding

concurrently and alternating back and forth throughout the process of analysis. This is similar to the grounded theory analysis performed by Fisher-Smith (1999):

Throughout the analytic process of coding it is important to remember that each posited concept or category, regardless of its level of abstraction, does not directly correspond to the “piece” of data which initiated the concept’s genesis. That is, the researcher does not read a segment of textual data and immediately arrive at the conceptual label which directly represents that segment of text. Rather, the conceptual label is reflective not only of a particular segment of text, but of the implicit context of the interview text as a whole. Any smaller segment or piece of textual data is already related to the larger interview, and cannot be understood except in relation to the larger text of which it is a part. (p. 45)

Observational data was treated in a similar manner as the interview data: always analyzed in relation to the greater conceptual whole—subsuming my full experience within the program.

### **Open Coding/Noting**

Open coding is the initial phase of data analysis wherein the most basic categories of information are developed (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Corbin and Strauss describe this initial phase as fracturing of the data, wherein this data is “broken down analytically” (1990, p. 12). Data may be broken down and coded at the level of a sentence-segment, sentence, paragraph, event, or an entire document. Grounded theorists suggest that segmented data is then given conceptual labels. “By breaking down and conceptualizing, we mean taking apart an observation, a sentence, a paragraph, and giving each discrete incident, idea, or event, a name, something that stands for or represents the phenomenon” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 63). Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggest that the newly labeled concepts allow the data to be compared with other data.



Rather than placing abstract conceptual labels on the transcripts, the hermeneutic modification taken herein might be better termed an ‘open noting’ wherein the interviews obtained were extensively noted for meaning. This included making descriptive (emphasizing the content of the text) and interpretive comments and questions. McLeod (2011) discusses this hermeneutic modification to a grounded theory analysis in his chapter on “Variants of Grounded Theory.” Additionally, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) describe this initial noting as consisting of a “dialogue between the researchers, their coded data, and their psychological knowledge, about what it might mean for participants to have these concerns, in this context” (p. 79). Indeed, the primary researcher attempted to explore and notate the meaning of these interview segments in light of the larger context and data as a whole.

For example, in one segment a student described returning to GBA and noticed that other students were “changed so much.” She went on to say, “I was angry, and I was scared cause I was like ‘I’m not gonna have any friends like, its cool, I’m just gonna be even more isolate[d] than I was before.’” My open coding/notation on this particular interview segment attempted to capture this student’s meaning in context. I noted that this student, “Re-entered GBA ‘angry’ and ‘scared,’ fearing further isolation, as the other girls had changed without her.” I interpreted this student as fearing social isolation as she returned to GBA. By saying “*further* isolation” I was recalling and relating this segment to previous comments she had made about having already felt isolated in the past.

Open coding during another student’s interview more explicitly drew connection between a particular segment, and her interview as a whole. At the beginning of her interview, this student said, “I needed to get away. And I got to.” On this segment I noted: “In the larger context of her interview this comment takes on clearer meaning, as [this student] seemed to decide

herself to come to GBA.” This notation reflected something this student would later explain in her interview, that she had personally chosen to come to GBA unlike many of GBA’s students who were required to attend.

A similar process was followed throughout student interviews, with descriptive and interpretive comments placed on interview segments throughout the transcripts. This process of open noting was performed by the primary researcher and then reviewed by a research assistant. The researcher looked for similarities and differences among the notations, and data that could be grouped together in categories and subcategories. Accordingly, open noting gave place for constant comparison and questioning of the data.

### **Axial Coding**

The purpose of axial coding is to reassemble the information that was broken apart when creating distinct categories during open coding. Axial coding involves a process of relating and linking categories. Strauss and Corbin (1990) outline a coding paradigm that is applied to further explicate and relate these categories. A paradigm is developed through breaking down a particular phenomenon into its related components. According to these theorists the components of a *phenomenon* include “*conditions, context, action/interactional strategies, and consequences*” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 96, emphasis added); these components will be reviewed in turn.

To identify a *phenomenon* a researcher looks for the central idea, event, interaction, or meaning that is operating for a group of data. A researcher may ask the question, “What is happening here?” when noticing repeated patterns that relate to a particular phenomenon. *Conditions* are the events and circumstances that lead to the occurrence of the phenomena. From a relational and hermeneutic standpoint, these conditions need not be sequenced linearly. In fact,

conditions may operate simultaneous with a phenomena or in a teleological manner (e.g., a person may act for the sake of a distinct purpose). According to Strauss and Corbin *context* refers to the “specific set of properties that pertain to a phenomenon; that is, the locations of events or incidents pertaining to a phenomenon along a dimensional range” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). The *action/interaction strategies* are the purposeful behaviors/responses aimed at managing the phenomena within its specific context. These behaviors, themselves, are likely to impact the phenomena, and thus their *consequences* must be considered (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

More generally, axial coding can be thought of as asking questions of the data to help in the development and relating of categories. “When analysts code axially, they look for answers to questions such as why or how come, where, when, how, and with what results, and in so doing they uncover relationships among categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 127). Asking these questions is likely to deepen and expand the researcher’s formulation of the data, leading to connections and relations between categories and subcategories, leading to the development of themes. This critical questioning process is not unlike the process of hermeneutic reflection.

For example, as part of axial coding I related that, taken together, several of my observations and interviews reflected how “Staff in all areas (school, housekeeping, mentors, therapist, cook) seem interested and invested in being a part of the applied practice of relationality at GBA.” Indeed, it was clear in both my interactions and students’ descriptions that GBA staff members were widely invested in how their work reflected the relational model that was formally adopted by GBA. Similarly, I coalesced a number of student interviews and observations into the following axial level reflection: “While some students noted frustrations with staff for a variety of reasons (e.g., being inconsistent, feeling targeted by staff, not doing ‘their job’), several of these students also expressed compassion or understanding in terms of

where these staff may be coming from and tried to ‘stand in their shoes.’” This second example of axial coding served to re-assemble and interpret this study’s data by joining together several comments that could otherwise seem disjointed. Indeed, students’ expressed feelings of both discontentment and understanding toward staff relating to their apparent faults. Yet taken together, students’ descriptions seemed to reflect how they situated staff’s difficulties quite compassionately, by considering staffs’ situated perspective (i.e., the challenge of being a staff member at GBA).

### **Selective Coding**

This final phase of analysis, selective coding, is the process of integrating the major categories developed during open and axial coding into a core category and a cogent grounded theory. The core category is the central phenomenon of the study that captures the essence of what the research is about. This is analogous to the process of developing of general themes in various other approaches to qualitative research; however, Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that all the data be unified into one central theory, rather than several themes. And from a grounded theory approach, the theory ought to hold theoretical explanation about the phenomena as a series of well-integrated concepts surrounding a theoretical scheme (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The data and categories developed through open and axial coding are considered broadly in this integration, and these various categories and subcategories should necessarily relate to the core category. “A central category has analytic power.... [I]t should be able to account for considerable variation within categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 146). As such, the intent of selective coding is to explicate patterns of relationships among the various categories and their simultaneous relationship to the core category.

To aid in the development of this core category and grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that researchers seek to formulate a narrative story of the data. The purpose of this narrative is to provide a descriptive overview of the data that has unfolded through the process of data gathering and analysis. Generating this narrative may help bring clarity as the data is linked together to form a storyline.

Developing this storyline, the researchers may ask questions like “what is the main issue or problem that seems to connect these categories?” or “what central meaning seems to connect these ideas?” Synthesizing this storyline the researcher may continue this questioning, with some overarching inquires: “What does all the action/interaction seem to be about?” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 14). As such, selective coding is not unlike the questioning process of axial coding, only that it occurs at a more global level.

The resulting grounded theory developed through selective coding will be presented at the end of the results section. However, the development of this overarching theme or story began well before I had completed other stages of data analysis, including the reflections I made immediately following my departure from GBA (i.e., the day after I departed GBA). I recorded that “Reflecting on my general impressions and experiences at Greenbrier Academy I am first struck by [the] ‘feeling’ of the place, in other words, the atmosphere. I experienced this to be warm, caring, welcoming, and of loving concern at nearly all levels.” This after-departure reflection directly impacted the development of my grounded theory, though I had not yet begun formal open coding/noting. Indeed, the larger whole of my experience at GBA was considered both prior to and throughout the process of data analysis.

## Validity

While validity is sought in the resulting grounded theory, the definition of *validity* for a qualitative study may differ from traditional definitions. From a traditional, positivist scientific perspective, validity emphasizes a claim that one's findings are objectively true. As has been discussed, a relational ontology questions whether even quantitative scientists can remove themselves from a contextually embedded, interpretive stance to access 'objective' reality. Kvale (1996) argues that instead of presuming to describe objective reality, validity in qualitative research rests itself on the quality of craftsmanship in research. "Validation comes to depend on the quality of craftsmanship during investigation, continually checking, questioning, and theoretically interpreting the findings" (Kvale, 1996, p. 241).

While quantitative researchers often place strong, even singular, emphasis on the validity of their measurement instrument (e.g., Does this instrument measure what it purports to measure?), qualitative researchers consider validity to be continually relevant throughout an investigation (Kvale, 1996). Valid qualitative conclusions are convincing, defensible, and grounded. Arriving at this point begins well before data is collected; it begins with sound theoretical presuppositions. In this study, presuppositions are directly reflected in the research purposes and questions that were developed from an extensive literature review of the philosophies, practicalities, and therapeutic implications of individualism and relationality. For example, this study presupposes a strong cultural influence of individualism as consequential in the lives of this study's participants.

Beyond a study's presuppositions, Kvale (1996) suggests that validity extends into the appropriateness of the research design described herein in achieving the expressed purposes of the study. As reviewed, the qualitative methods employed in this study were specifically

designed to explore the lived experiences of students interviewed and observed. Exposing these lived experiences is critical to most directly and thoughtfully achieving this study's purpose in examining experiential change.

During data collection, validity was contingent on the quality of interviewing and my continually checking the meaning of what was shared. To actively attend to my role as an interpretive researcher Kvale (1996) suggests the following:

A hermeneutical approach [to listening] involves an interpretative listening to the multiple horizons of meaning involved in the interviewees' statements, with an attention to the possibilities of continual reinterpretations within the hermeneutical circle of the interview. (p. 135)

Kvale suggests that a qualitative interview intends to grasp the meaning and central themes of what the interviewees say. Validity checks were also performed by asking students to verify my descriptions and interpretations (Kazdin, 2003). This required me to share my understandings and interpretations with the participant, followed by a question like, "Did I capture what you were meaning correctly?"

Indeed, as I interviewed clients I repeatedly summarized my interpretation of what the students were sharing and inquired as to the accuracy of my summary. For example, while interviewing one student I inquired in this manner: "If I can summarize the things you're sharing with me, it's that you're less passive in relationships than [student confirmed saying: mmhmm] you use to be, you're more, um, willing to share the things that you're feeling and thinking?" This student then confirmed my interpretation, responding again with an affirmative, "mmhmm." As I repeated this processes throughout my interviews students generally confirmed my

summaries and interpretations, though occasionally students were willing to also correct my misunderstandings.

During data analysis validity included selecting and carefully applying an appropriate linguistic style for transcription, sound interpretation and judgments, and analysis validity checks. Indeed other professional colleagues were consulted, to dialogue with regarding my own analysis. These colleagues' interpretations enriched my analysis, while also generally confirming my own interpretations as appropriate (see additional information in the discussion section of this report). In reporting my results, validity was applicable in reporting accurately the most salient findings of my study.

### **Results<sup>1</sup>**

As described previously, analysis for this study was informed by a hermeneutically modified grounded theory methodology, starting with open noting. Indeed, the primary researcher first explored and examined the basic data obtained, including interview transcriptions and written observations. While sifting through this data it became clear that the themes of the data fit closely with several of the features of relationality, as delineated by Slife and Wiggins (2009). And these features were particularly relevant to this study's research questions and informed the outlines created for my semi-structured interviews of GBA's students.

While critical that the results of this study are grounded in the data itself, qualitative research from a hermeneutic perspective also involves a number of dialogues, including between past and present, between the researcher's interpretive framework and the interviewees, and between the larger whole and the smaller parts or data units. In this case, the 'larger whole' includes the pre-existing conceptual framework that relationists have articulated. In a sense, this

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<sup>1</sup> Names used throughout the results and discussion sections of this study have been changed to help protect participants' confidentiality.



qualitative study involved a type of hypothesis testing (albeit tentative, informal, and rupturable hypotheses), concerning whether GBA was thoroughly relational. Indeed, examining the data in light of the main features delineated by its founders is one way to assess GBA's relational success.

As it happens, many of Slife and Wiggins' (2009) ten features of relationality were quite relevant to the gathered data and fit the *emergent* themes found within the data. (The term, emergent, is used here to convey that themes were derived thickly from the data themselves. While grounded in the data itself, this does not imply that the preconceptions and interpretations of the researcher are excluded in deciphering these themes. In other words, the interpretive role of the researcher is presumed to be unavoidable.) However, four of these ten features (features one, six, seven, and ten) were found irrelevant to the analysis of this particular study due to these features being abstract guidelines for therapists. For example feature six states, "The therapist's 'here-and-now' relationship with the client is the most pivotal aspect of the therapeutic experience and should be focused upon to facilitate change." This particular feature is intended to guide therapist's in-session interactions with clients. This researcher had no direct access to individual therapy sessions wherein here-and-now therapeutic exchanges might have been experienced.

Given the unique relevance of the other six features of relationality, data relating to these features will be reviewed in detail. Reviewing these results will also shed light on the overarching research questions of this qualitative exploration concerning the relational consistency of GBA's treatment, given their strong connection to these features.

## **Feature Two: Good, Virtuous Relations**

The second feature of relationality delineated by Slife and Wiggins (2009) proposes that, “Relationships should be good rather than satisfying, because a true relationship is more about virtuous relations than an individual’s personal satisfaction” (p. 20). Consequentially, relational therapy is foremost interested in helping clients develop virtuous relationships. This goal is given priority over clients seeking their individual pleasure or satisfaction. As will be shown, GBA students and their larger community demonstrated remarkable lived-embodiment of good relations. In sum, students seemed to experience themselves and others at GBA as serving the good in their relationships, in a manner strikingly different from what they had experienced in the past. Students described being met with deep caring, and increasingly noticed themselves reflecting a similar concern for others. They were particularly surprised to be met with relational caring in response to interpersonal conflict and experienced peer subgroups at GBA to be quite fluid and welcoming. Students also seemed to value particularly challenging or messy relationships at GBA—feeling served by relationships that provide frank, uncomfortable feedback. Finally, I will describe how students and staff welcomed me, the researcher, with warmth and caring while on campus, along with the exceptions to these more relational themes.

**Of students being received with kindness and caring.** Students described and were seen experiencing a deep sense of caring from the GBA community. For many this relational concern was first evident in how they were welcomed at GBA, though some may not have recognized this caring at the time. Student’s seemed to experience this caring as quite unique and meaningful—different from relationships they have previously experienced.

Abby’s experience seems an apt example of how GBA students felt embraced by the GBA community. She described receiving a warm, caring welcome upon returning to GBA after

leaving for several months to receive some specialized treatment elsewhere. Upon returning to GBA Abby expected that other students would “hate me; no one’s even gonna realize I’m gone.” However, the day she returned one student, “literally like pushes my dad out of the way and like picks me up and she’s like ‘you’re back’.” This strikingly caring welcome seemed quite surprising to Abby. She recalled saying to this student, “oh my god, like you actually, thought about me?” This student responded by saying “are you kidding? We found out you were coming back before you did!” In saying this she seemed to communicate the eagerness of the GBA community as a whole (i.e., “we”) to have Abby return. In fact, Abby then related that all of the GBA students “were like standing in this room and it was like, ‘welcome back Abby’ and it was just *so nice* [said loudly and slowly] and like my dad started tearing up and so did I and I was like, ‘*they actually like me*’ [said in a whisper].”

Abby’s voice inflections as she related this experience may reflect the significance of this experience for Abby. As noted in the transcription, Abby dropped the volume of her voice significantly when stating “they actually like me” and again when she reflected that this acceptance “feels nice.” Her change in tone helped communicate how meaningful this experience was for Abby. In sum, Abby seems to convey how strongly she felt cared about upon returning to GBA. In this act of caring, the GBA community, as a whole, seemed to welcome her back with excitement and affection.

Abby also described the caring welcome she received as a very foreign experience, surprised that she was met with such intense caring after being gone. She contrasted this experience with how she was received by a “close friend” outside of GBA, after these two friends had been separated for a similar amount of time.

I text her I was like ‘oh my god I’m back like, I’m, getting ready to go to school’, and she was like ‘oh cool I sorta missed you’ and I was like ‘you sort of missed me? I thought about you every day like, thanks for that.’

This contrasting example served to illuminate the uniqueness of how GBA embraced Abby when she returned. In contrast to feeling strong relational warmth, Abby felt little caring, even indifference, from this friend. Other student’s descriptions will echo a similar sentiment, that the GBA community cares about each other in a manner somewhat foreign to them.

Grace described a similar contrast in caring, comparing how new students are received at GBA against other private schools she has attended. At GBA she has experienced the community as having empathy for what it feels like to be new, not wanting incoming students to feel like they are on display, akin to a zoo animal. Instead she said “everyone kind of understands what that’s like and is sympathetic to that” and that while “people are less curious about you . . . at the same time they still, you know, care about you.” Grace seemed to suggest that this caring is grounded in others trying to compassionately relate to the experience of being a new student. Grace also shared that while she was “intimidated” to approach others when she first arrived at GBA, in retrospect she sees how “beyond okay it would be for any of them to like, come up to me or come up to like any of the girls who have been here longer and already have like, established friends and like just like start a conversation.” She sees the GBA community as being open and welcoming, and that established friendships are quite open to the inclusion of new students.

While I, the researcher, was on campus I recorded interactions between the GBA community and a new student who arrived. These observations illustrate how students and staff actively reached out to this new student, in a caring manner. This student did not respond to a

mentor who, during an art therapy group, asked if she could help this student find a place to sit (she was standing alone, disengaged from the group). Then I recorded that the group therapist took time to “check in” with this new student one-on-one. This therapist “gave this girl very caring eye contact and focused attention.” A bit later I noticed this new student to be sitting alone, “staring blankly.” I recorded that “one girl approached the new girl sitting alone with a deck of cards and chatted with her about basketball.” I experienced each of these acts as attentive and thoughtful efforts to include this new student, and perhaps put her at ease within the community. Staff and students seemed to make considerable efforts to reach out to this student, perhaps communicating a sense of community caring from her first day at GBA.

Relational welcoming was also evident in my initial observations of GBA students. As I arrived in North Carolina, GBA students were returning to the school after many had completed a weeklong visit at home, with several students unexpectedly arriving on my same flight. I was especially struck by one caring exchange that occurred at the small Greenbrier Valley airport the day I arrived: “I witnessed a warm embrace exchanged between the headmaster and one of the students. This seemed a mutual expression of caring.” While this hug could be viewed as being as an inappropriate gesture from an authority figure to a student, I certainly did not experience it this way. Rather it seemed a strong mutual expression of relational caring, safely situated in a public setting. This hug was accompanied by multiple sincere verbal expressions of warmth and welcoming from the school’s headmaster toward several returning students at the airport, and later at the schoolhouse. It seemed evident that the headmaster valued and attended to his relationship with each of these students.

The students, themselves, seemed to exchange warm expressions of reunification. At the airport I also observed, “most of the girls huddled near each other” showing “excitement to see

one another at the airport, with caring and interest about each other's visits." Students seemed thrilled to see one another, after spending this time apart. Demonstrations of caring and excited reunification were also evident during the first meals I joined while at GBA.

Consistent with these observations Madison remarked in her interview, "And I could not wait until [last] Sunday when all the girls were getting back because I missed all of my friends and everyone just in general so, so much." She went on to contrast this experience to her spring break last year, having just recently begun treatment at GBA: "spring break came up and all the girls left and I wasn't excited to even see my friends when they came back. And now I'm so excited to see everyone come back." Madison's comments reflect a shift in the nature of her relationships at GBA over the past year. Note that Madison seemed to especially value the relationships she has developed, as she missed her "friends and everyone" while separated. My observations matched Madison's description in that it seemed clear that the community, as a whole, missed one another. Perhaps other students in a similar situation would respond with some excitement, though I was struck by the overall tone of genuine interest I also observed occurring between students at the airport, and the unfettered excitement (i.e., shrills and hugs) to be reunified together. These students could easily have felt self-pity or otherwise bemoaned having to conclude a week of increased freedom and time with family and friends at home. Instead, students were interested in each other, and demonstrated relational caring over personal pity or other potential individual interests.

In addition to examples of warm welcoming, GBA students seemed to experience ongoing acts of kindness. Sophia, for example, described how she came to trust that others at GBA cared by observing how the community responded to one another. Sophia related that

witnessing relational caring in action seemed to help her come to feel more safe and secure at GBA.

Just seeing it when girls will punch another girl and the next day they talk about it and they're fine, or a girl runs away and instead of everyone getting mad, everyone makes sure she's okay and hugs her. And just, we get conditioner taken away because a girl will drink it to see if she can get drunk off conditioner and then instead of girls being really upset about it, they're sad that she had to go there and do something like that.

Sophia has noticed that aversive student behaviors are responded to with caring and concern from the GBA community. Her final example of GBA students losing hair conditioner due to one peer attempting to get intoxicated on this product especially highlights the relational practice of prioritizing good relationships over individual satisfaction. One might easily expect these teenage students to be quite focused on being 'wronged' by this person—focused on the individual inconvenience she has caused them. Instead, Sophia experiences the community as quite focused on relational caring toward this peer, concerned for her well-being more than the negative impact her choice had on themselves.

Other students also shared specific examples about how others at GBA have demonstrated this caring. Jill described her academic advisor as going out of his way to help her with a variety of kind gestures. In one meaningful, unnecessary act of kindness this advisor “ran around the school” to find Jill to share good news about her college acceptance.

I remember at like, 7 in the morning, he, when I got my um, email acceptance into my college he like, printed it out and like, ran around the school trying to find me to get it [laughs] [Doug also laughs] *to give it to me, and, it was just really nice, and it was a good surprise* [said while laughing].

Jill seems to see this adviser as caring about and ministering to her in this manner. She shares this as an example of caring she has felt in the larger GBA community—one relationship among a larger community of relationships. In fact, just previous to this example she described the GBA community as filled with “genuinely good people” who “genuinely care.”

My direct observations included similar examples of genuine caring. For example, I recorded how the health teacher reached out to one student, Julie, repeatedly during her class. This student seemed disengaged and sat isolated from the rest of the class while this teacher kindly, but persistently invited her to join the class in an activity. At the end of class this teacher took time to talk to Julie one-on-one. I recorded that this teacher complimented Julie given that “teachers had seen [her] as engaging in class/participating more. She also said that she notices Julie to be more genuine.” This teacher’s compliments seemed unusually placed, as they were not consistent with my observations of Julie during that particular class, wherein Julie seemed rather disengaged. A relationist might term this a ‘dialectical’ intervention, wherein rational consistency is sometimes violated to enhance an altruistic relationship (Slife, Mitchell, and Whoolery, 2004). Indeed, I experienced this as an act of caring and concern, and this teachers words and caring approach seemed reflective of the larger community.

In fact, I similarly observed examples of relational caring occurring between students while on campus. One particular example seemed to demonstrate the caring nature of the GBA community as a whole. Following a meal at GBA, staff asked for volunteers to help with clean up from dinner. One student quickly volunteered herself, and this was followed by a near unison expression from other students in the dining hall to disallow this student from cleaning. The community expressed that this student “always does” chores on campus and that she should not be allowed to volunteer this time. Rather, others in the community readily volunteered to help. I



experienced this as an act of community caring, as the students acknowledged this student's regular contributions to the community, while kindly prohibiting her from doing more that they felt she ought. This was one of several examples I witnessed (a couple others will be shared later), wherein the peer community seemed to manage itself through a culture of caring toward one another.

A few students identified the caring they felt at GBA as the main impetus for change that they experienced while in the program. After relating that she sees herself as changing significantly, I asked Jill what helped her make this change and she first credits GBA's caring milieu: "being like in a complete different environment, and just like, being in like such a like, I guess caring and fostering place like, people here really care, make you feel good about yourself. And they really support you." Jill aptly summarizes the experiences of others at GBA. Like some of the examples just reviewed, Jill experiences this caring and support as being quite meaningful, and of primary importance to her change. She also confirms the sentiment that the caring students are met with at GBA is uniquely different from what they recall experiencing in the past.

**Of students giving kindness and caring to others.** GBA students themselves also reflected the second feature of relationality, that relationships should be good rather than satisfying, noticing themselves acting for the sake of good relationships, in altruistic consideration of others. As will be shown, students described a commitment to their relationships with fellow students, wanting to show caring because they truly cared. Some seemed to describe having relational concern for others prior to their time at GBA, and that GBA helped them better live or embody these caring intentions.

An example shared by Leah seemed to reflect well how students see themselves acting for the good of the relationship. She first described that she particularly tries to serve those that may go unnoticed, stating, “Like I try really hard to help people, especially the people that I feel like get overlooked sometimes.” Her example demonstrates this concern, as she described being sensitive and offering help to a peer, whom she did not know well, when this peer was struggling. She agreed to help this peer prepare a song to perform for her parents. This classmate proposed that Leah sing while she accompanied on the guitar. When these classmates met later to practice, Leah described that this student “didn’t wanna try, didn’t wanna do it at all,” despite encouragement from Leah. Later this peer returned to ask for Leah’s help again. (Returning to ask Leah for help, alone, may suggest that this peer felt cared about and safe with Leah.) With little time remaining to prepare, Leah suggested that the song would be more meaningful if this student sung it herself, for her parents. It likely would have been possible for Leah to *satisfy* this peer’s request and sing the song for this student. However, Leah believed it better for her friend to sing the song herself, and was willing to tell her that. A strong concern for this peer was more important than appeasing her request.

With her encouragement Leah described that this peer “did it for her dad when I was there...to like support her doing that and like, um. I just tried to be there for her aft--even after that so she knows that she can trust me.” Leah reported supporting this peer as she sang her song followed by efforts to stick with this friend “even after.” Leah hoped that this peer could trust her genuine concern and support. Leah’s example is similar to what other students shared, as she noticed herself serving this relationship, wanting this peer to understand that she could trust Leah because she was committed to the relationship (i.e., “be there for her”).

Like Leah, Jill shared an example of committed relational caring, wherein she tries to also “be there” to listen to her roommate at GBA. In explaining how she tries to attend to this roommate she explained:

I listened to her and I dunno I just try and be there for her you know I’ll sit with her, I try and like stay with a person through the end cause, I mean that’s what I would want. It’s not so much someone like, comforting me but someone like sticking with me? That’s what I really try to do.

Jill evidences a value of joining with others who may be struggling. For Jill, what she does to comfort others is less important than simply “sticking with” the person; indeed, she strives to “stay with a person to the end.” Like Leah, this seemed a particularly salient example of altruistic caring, absent of any instrumental intentions to fix or change the other person. Leah and Jill descriptions seem an apt illustration of how GBA’s students demonstrate their caring through being with others.

Other students also described examples of genuine caring. For example, Madison shared a unique example from the day I interviewed her, relating that she reached out to a new GBA student whom she had known prior to being at GBA. In fact, Madison noted having a history of interpersonal discord with this new student.

Like today the new girl was sitting alone at lunch and I knew her from my last program and we didn’t exactly get along in my last program, but I sat down with her because I like, I just wanted to rebuild our relationship again? And just make sure that she knows that she’s not alone.

In an act of caring, Madison sat next to this student during lunch. Her concern for peer was evident in this action, and she later reiterated not wanting this student to “feel that she was

alone.” Madison also related wanting this student to know that she and others cared about her “from day one.” Especially notable is that Madison described that she and this new student were familiar with one another, yet they did not “get along” previously. She reached out to this peer despite previous interpersonal discord, and later confirmed that she likely would not have reached out to this student in the past. This example provides a unique contrast in relational caring for Madison. Other students may not have had the same opportunity to reflect on peer relationship at GBA as being changed from previous associations with this relationship. However, several students contrasted limited concern for others in the past, against examples of caring while at GBA. Indeed Leah and Jill reflect how many GBA students seemed to evidence a movement toward greater relational caring.

For some students, developing altruistic relationships seemed more about engaged action, than about intentions. These students describe having always felt genuine concern for others, but yet they did not typically experience themselves as living altruistically. For example, Jill relates that prior to attending GBA she would have wanted to reach out to support others, but not with the same “frequency,” “intensity,” or “empathy.” In fact, she says that for a period of time “I wouldn’t have even thought about, another person. I mean I wasn’t thinking about anyone really.” She saw a strong movement toward relational concern for others. Jill noticed herself to be less self-focused such that she better recognized opportunities to help others. Another student, Abby, described that historically she would isolate rather than help others. She said that previous to her growth at GBA, “I [would] care about people and yet, I like can’t let myself be around them all of the time.” However, Abby described that with progress at GBA she started to reach out, demonstrating her caring for others with little ongoing isolation.

Samantha shares about a similar shift in her ability to demonstrate relational caring. When asked how she contributed to the GBA community Samantha related, “I feel like now I can sort of fill a leaderships position that at first I couldn’t fill. And sort of guiding girls and sort of speaking out for the whole community.” Samantha sees herself as more effectively serving the GBA community than when she first arrived. While she wanted to serve the community since she first arrived at GBA, she reflected on being more of a “silent leader” explaining that she “couldn’t really speak up for anything” and that she “didn’t hold a lot of confidence.” Similar to Jill and Abby, Samantha sees herself as coming to live with more interpersonal outreach. Like others I interviewed, Samantha came to GBA having some caring intentions but had difficulty living or showing these intentions.

As several examples illustrated, GBA students see themselves living, more and more, with relational caring. Students seemed to place value on “being there” for their peers without clear instrumental intentions to fix their peers problems. Oft times, the best service they have learned to provide to others companionship and caring. Students related having made particular growth in how to demonstrate their caring for others, having previously felt but not acted on this caring.

**Of unexpected relational responses.** Virtuous rather than satisfying relationships, the second feature of relationality, was also evident in the unexpected experiences of relational caring that some students witnessed or experienced. During times of interpersonal disagreement or difficulty these students have noticed GBA staff and the larger community responding with particular caring. These examples may be particularly salient to this feature of relationality, as these students expressed surprise at others clearly sacrificing personal satisfaction for the good of the relationship. As their descriptions will illustrate these students seemed to experience this

caring as genuine, that others cared without seeming to have self-serving motivations. In other words, they described feeling cared about because others genuinely cared. This is in contrast to more instrumental relations, wherein one is treated as a means to a self-serving end.

One student, Jill, described her surprise at GBA's staff responding differently than she expected to interpersonal difficulties. She relates that staff "take *so much* [said with emphasis] like, if I were them I would have, I would have quit like, a long time ago....So, it's just really amazing to see such like, I guess good people, like genuinely good people." While not clarifying the exact nature of these difficulties, Jill says that staff "take so much," just after saying that staff give students "chance after chance." Together, her statements suggest that students push relational limits with staff. Indeed, one might expect clients to challenge authority figures in a treatment program like GBA. Yet, these staff members respond in a manner that convinces Jill that they are "genuinely good people." She also relates that their manner of responding is different than what she would expect saying, "I mean most people that I know wouldn't take that." Jill noticed GBA to be "different" from other treatment programs "early on" in this regard. From Jill's vantage, staff prioritized their service to students over their personal job satisfaction or enjoyment. In other words, they act for the sake of GBA's students above seeking individual fulfillment.

In addition to the GBA staff, Sophia characterized the larger GBA community as responding compassionately when someone loses their cool. In fact, she has witnessed that students who are struggling are especially met with relational concern. She describes that at GBA "girls have freakouts all the time [both Doug and Sophia laugh] and they're met with hugs and a lot of compassion and concern." She contrasts this with her experience outside of GBA where "nobody cares why" when a person "flip[s] out." Sophia describes GBA's caring response

to those who are struggling as disparate from experiences in outside contexts where others do not care “why” she or others might behave unusually. At GBA she perceives that when acting out, students would be met with relational caring, while also implying that the community may try to understand why the person is struggling. Jill agrees with Sophia sentiment saying “girls here are just *really* [said with emphasis] kind and when you’re going through a hard time, they’ll, they’ll do their best to help you out and they’ll offer assistance and, you know, they care.” Jill also notes that other students can “sympathize and empathize” with students who are struggling because each student goes through similar struggles.

Sophia and Jill’s descriptions emphasize how the larger GBA community responds to difficulty with relational concern. This seems a contrast to students’ expectations in their daily interactions outside of GBA, wherein others respond with little consideration of the person who is struggling. Indeed, as Sophia and Jill’s descriptions illustrate, students seem historically accustomed to others responding in a manner that serves their own interests, not the interest of the relationship. This represents a strong, unexpected evidence of relational concern and caring—expanding on my own preconceptions and experience of what it means to be caring toward others. While I had conceived of relational caring in the face of interpersonal difficulties, I had not encountered or expected students and staff to respond with hugs and compassion in the face of “freakouts” and mistreatment. More likely, I would have expected relationally sensitive youth or staff member to experience some degree of initial irritation, perhaps followed by a degree of patience and understanding. In contrast, these students describe how the GBA community seems to embrace those who are lashing out with remarkable and genuine compassion.

**Of unique relational subgrouping.** Shared caring within the whole of the GBA community seemed to reflect itself in how some students described subgrouping at GBA. This seemed to reflect the peer culture’s embrace of feature two, which situates good relationships above satisfying relations. Students described associating more closely with particular students, including having particular groups of friends. As their descriptions will illustrate, however, this subgrouping seemed quite different from subgrouping they experienced elsewhere. They described that the interpersonal boundaries between groups at GBA were more permeable, welcoming, and concerned for the well being of ‘outsiders.’ Indeed, caring relationships seemed to exist both within *and* between these subgroups.

Grace, for example, makes a brief comment about “caring about everyone” even though she may distance herself from some students. “We’re a house full of girls—[drama] definitely happens... the people who I really, you know, seek out and really consider friends, umm, aren’t really involved in a lot of drama, either. Ah, I mean of course I care about everyone in the community.” Similar to other students, she seems to be assuring me that even though she associates more closely with some of her peers, she cares about everyone in the GBA community.

Like Grace, Madison also notes that she associates with some peers more than others. She perceives subgrouping in throughout the GBA community, but describes how this subgrouping differs from her previous social experiences. “I have a group of friends and I really care about all of them, like very very deeply... Like everyone has their group of friends and we all get along.” However she continues by asserting, “It’s not like there’s cliques [at GBA].” She then described how subgrouping in the GBA peer culture seems to differ from cliques she experienced in high school:



Here if you don't wanna hang out with your friends and you wanna go hang out with another group of people, that's okay. At normal high school, if you were in a clique and you went to hang out with another group of girls, like you would get so much crap for it later on. They would be like, 'Why did you go hang out with them? And yada yada yada...' And here it's just like, 'Oh, like, how's that person doing?' You know. 'Like, what's going on with them?'

Madison seems to experience subgrouping at GBA as qualitatively different than typical teenage "cliques." Subgroups at GBA seem much more flexible and welcoming to outsiders. In other words, boundaries between different groups of friends at GBA are quite permeable. She also notes an absence of exclusivity, rivalry, and maliciousness that exists in many high schools. In fact, she finds members of one group will inquire about the well being of others outside the group, when given the opportunity. This is evidence of caring concern that may extend beyond common boundaries, and suggests a peer culture of relational caring.

Leah seems to notice a similar peer culture of caring, extending beyond her closest peers. After describing that she has formed some especially close friendships at GBA, Leah remarks that she has "learn[ed] to love everybody else, too. Like even people like you don't necessarily like or like to be around." She further describes having compassion that everyone is there to "work on something" and that she has a caring concern for the whole community. Taken together Grace, Madison, and Leah's experiences seem reflective of my own observations that GBA seemed to have a permeable, welcoming, and caring peer culture.

Community meetings and activities seemed to be one mechanism to help maintain this caring across the community. Abby, described that while there are some students that she associates with more frequently than others, that community drumming is something that brings

everyone in the community together. “[T]he one constant thing that people always connect through is drumming.” Similarly, I recorded how the community seemed to connect together through weekly community meetings. The weekly meeting I attended began with recognitions and concerns that students could share, voluntarily. As one student would recognize or address a concern about another peer, other students would often say “A-ho,” expressing their support or agreement about what was being said. This exercise seemed to unify the school around a caring relational concern between members of the community.

Taken together, GBA students described associating more closely with some students and subgroups at GBA than others. What was unique at GBA is a totality of caring that extends outside one’s group. Subgroups at GBA were also perceived as more flexible and inviting to ‘outsiders.’ In other words, while students described preferring particular peer relationships—students felt especially close to and spent additional time with particular students and peer subgroups—these preferences were maintained within a context of broad relational caring. Indeed, the GBA community and programs seemed to provide valuable opportunities for students to connect as a whole (e.g., drumming together), outside of their interpersonal preferences.

**Of receiving and giving “tough love.”** Another way several students distinguished their relationships at GBA from elsewhere is that they received and shared honest, straightforward feedback with others, especially their therapists. This was a particularly clear example of how GBA students pursued good rather than satisfying relationships, relationality’s second feature. As will be shown, students reflected that this honest feedback was quite helpful. In fact, students feel cared about *because* others shared this challenging feedback.

Jill reflected this sentiment well in saying “my therapist gives me what I need to hear rather than like what I want to hear.” Jill interpreted the feedback she received from her therapist as “tough love,” feeling cared about because he told her what she needed to hear, not what she wanted to hear. Jill related that this experience is foreign to her saying, “he’s kinda the first person that has done that for me.” Not only does this statement convey that others in her life have not been similarly honest and challenging, but she frames her therapist doing so as an act of kindness. The phrase “done that for me” conveys how Jill interprets this as a service or gift from her therapist. Other GBA students also relate feeling challenged by their therapists in ways that can be difficult, and like Jill, they experienced this a “tough love.” For instance, Abby relates that some of the things that GBA therapists say “*make you want to punch a hole through the wall* [said with slow and deliberate emphasis]...because it is *so* [said with emphasis] uncomfortable.” Abby has also come to realize that this uncomfortable feedback from these therapists is quite helpful—that she now sees this as a relational service to herself and her fellow students. Recall, that relationists’ conception of “good” relationships are to be virtuous rather than satisfying. These GBA therapists seem more concerned with helping the students than with pleasing them.

Students also described their own growth in learning to treat others with “tough love.” Leah, for example, recalls having told her mom that she cannot drink alcohol during her visits home: “After like a couple incidents with that on my home visits, I was just like, ‘You can’t drink when I’m there anymore.’” In this, Leah shows that she is willing to say the hard things in this relationship, not just please her mom. Leah went on to contrast this caring relational approach against “hating” her mom in the past and not “car[ing] what happened to her.”

Sophia similarly described learning to set relational boundaries at GBA. She described that she has learned to set these boundaries with her father, who she relates as having treated her and her siblings quite poorly, even abusively.

I'm working on how to set boundaries and separate from unhealthy family patterns....

Before I felt guilty telling my dad that I didn't want to stay at his house or I felt guilty having to avoid him, but now it's . . . I'm working with my therapists on letting him know that I can't be there if he's gonna physically hurt my brother and I'm not gonna stick around and be homeless with him. . . . I mean coming here's the first time in my 17 years of life telling my dad 'no' to something.

For Sophia, tough love meant learning to set relational boundaries with her father's—not continuing to permit her father to hurt her and her brother. Sophia relates that she has not been able to set similar boundaries with her dad in the past. As Sophie and Leah's examples illustrate, GBA students seemed to set better boundaries with their family while at GBA.

In addition to setting healthy relational boundaries with family members, students seemed willing to provide challenging feedback to one another. There were both formal and informal ways that students seemed to say difficult things to one another on campus. Formally, students met together four days each week for relational council, wherein student leaders would monitor and recommend progress of their peers through the program's aspirations. During this council, a group of five students and one staff member would counsel students, one at a time, providing each an opportunity to reflect on her own progress and sharing some of the council's relational feedback. I experienced this feedback as both caring and helpful. Students on council would both praise the students and discuss relevant concerns. This feedback struck me as very specific, such that it could be very helpful to each given student.

Similarly, students and staff seemed to meet together weekly for what they called, advisory group. Here students and staff provided challenging feedback to one another. During one of these groups I recorded the following: “Girls seemed willing to give feedback that was not just positive but probably loving. Negative feedback seemed received without major defense.” These students seem quite willing to say difficult, not just pleasing, things to one another. They seemed to share this honest feedback intending help one another make progress in the program. This group seemed particularly worried about one particular student’s well being, providing her with particularly challenging and concerned feedback. The students then inquired how they could help this student, and she responded that some of her peers had already done the most meaningful they could by asking, “Can I sit with you?” Another student then shared how she could relate to this student’s experience, having been met with similar caring at GBA. I recorded how the intense caring that was shared between these students and staff members brought me, as the researcher, to tears. My emotionality well portrays the poignancy of this interaction for me and the other students involved. This interaction seemed a significant moment of human-to-human caring.

Students were also willing to say tough things in an informal setting, supporting a thoroughgoing culture of caring at GBA. One example of this occurred the day a new student was admitted to campus. This event seemed to create a buzz around campus between students. I recorded the following description of some of this discussion between peers on campus:

[One] girl said [this new student] was ‘scary’ looking. Another described her as ‘goth.’ Eventually another girl said ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover.’ At this point the conversation changed—with some girls seeming to backpedal about their previous comments.

The intervening student had quickly stifled hurtful gossip, in a manner that probably reminded her peers of their community's values. This seemed to be an act of caring toward the new student. Though this student was not directly present, this act could potentially have had an ongoing impact on how this student was received and understood by the community. Certainly, reminders and corrections such as this would help sustain a peer culture of caring at GBA.

In sum, GBA's students saw themselves as served by relationships more concerned with helping them than with pleasing them. Students seem to appreciate that their therapist challenged them, even when this was not comfortable. They also described coming to set healthy relational boundaries with their family and giving difficult, yet caring, feedback to each other on campus. In doing this students seemed partially responsible for managing the GBA community.

**Of kindness toward the researcher.** Relational caring was also extended towards me as the researcher. As will be described, I repeatedly experienced students and staff extending consideration and caring toward me. These experiences provided direct, experiential evidence of GBA's embrace of the second feature of relationality, that relationships should be good rather than satisfying.

While I was interviewing one GBA student, Grace, we were interrupted by a knock at the door. What ensued was a short interchange with a staff member that helped with housekeeping on campus. This simple interchange between this staff member, Grace, and myself seemed quite representative of my experience at GBA, and demonstrates how I was met with warmth and concern for my needs and comfort.

Nice to meet you, your name is? [Doug says: Doug.] Doug. If you need anything at all, umm, I get here a little before 6 the morning, so, I'm the early morning person here.  
[Doug says: Okay.] Any way I can help you while you're here, let me know—extra

towels, [Doug says: Thank you.] anything okay? [Doug says: I really appreciate it.]

Thank you. [Doug says: Take care.] And sorry babe, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

[Grace says: Oh, no problem.]

While this staff member disrupted my dialogue with Grace, she seemed motivated by concern for me. This staff member struck me as quite interested in my comfort on campus. Her nonverbal communication was also very caring, looking at me directly in the eye, with a kind smile and warm demeanor. She also apologized to Grace for having interrupted us and this seemed thoughtful. Later, this same staff member checked with me, more than once, while I was on campus to ensure my comfort. This was similar to interactions I had with several staff members while I was on campus, each wanting to ensure that my needs were met. While anticipating that relational practices would be infused within multiple aspects of the GBA experience (e.g., therapeutics and schooling), I did not expect that relationality would be so thoroughly practiced and embraced as to impact even those who did custodial work at GBA. Indeed this and similar experiences extended beyond my most generous expectations and preconceptions of how relationally caring the GBA community might be.

I also experienced GBA students as directly caring about me. During most meals students in the lunchroom would actively invite me to eat with them, seemingly concerned that I had someone to sit with. My first lunch on campus I recorded:

As I walked through the lunchroom, students at one table asked if I would like to sit with them. I said yes, obtained my food and sat with these three girls—who moved [around] the table to make space for me.

I reflected that this left me feeling “included” and that the students were “sensitive” to me.

During another meal three students moved to sit by me after other students had left me alone to

finish my meal, commenting that they could “not stand to let someone sit alone.” This seemed a very thoughtful gesture. I experienced several similar interactions as expressions of relational caring. Throughout the week students eagerly inquired whether I could interview them, participate in a group or activity that they treasured on campus, or had time to play a card game. During drum circles (a daily activity on campus), students both invited me to participate and taught me some basic drumming skills. When I had to depart early from campus due to inclement weather, some students expressed sadness and told me that I would be missed. Each of these experiences left me feeling directly cared about. This experience was clearly unexpected, and quite moving, causing me to reflect on students’ accounts of the caring they experienced at GBA quite differently. It made these accounts more real, understandable, and genuine. I, like the students I interviewed, was met with unmistakable caring and concern.

There were also less noticeable ways that students’ directly demonstrated kindness towards me as their visitor and interviewer. Throughout my interviews students responded to my questions in a very considerate manner, wanting to be helpful and clear. For example, Grace seemed quite considerate of me, as she apologized for having difficulty providing an example that I inquired about: “I don’t know, I don’t have a good answer.... I’m sorry.” Prior to this apology, Grace diverged a bit from the question I had asked. However, she returned to my original question on her own, acknowledging that she was having difficulty thinking of an example to fit what I was asking. In doing this, I experienced her as being quite considerate of me, wanting to answer the question I had asked. This was very similar to others I interviewed, each demonstrating strong consideration of me throughout our exchanges. It is notable that no students refused to answer any of my inquiries, despite me giving each student explicit



permission to not answer any given question. I experienced students as wanting to be as helpful as possible, with no extrinsic benefits to gain from these interviews.

While on campus, I felt consistently cared about by both staff and students. Students made clear efforts to welcome me, while staff made repeated efforts to ensure my comfort on campus. Evidence of caring was felt throughout my daily interactions and in the relational consideration shown by students I interviewed.

**Of possible exceptions to feature two.** A relationist does not deny the possibility that people can act in a self-interested manner. Rather, relational agency allows for the possibility that behaviors are motivated by a variety of intentions. While GBA values and strives toward altruistic relationships, it is certainly reasonable that instrumental interactions occur. As described previously, students shared numerous examples of genuine caring within the GBA community. Indeed, altruistic relations seemed to be the ‘rule,’ while instrumental relations were the ‘exception.’ A few of these exceptions will be described.

Samantha, for example, suggested that sometimes she feels like GBA’s mentors (line staff who regularly interact with the students) do not treat student’s “well.” She then related an experience wherein one particular mentor was asking her to help confiscate other students’ possessions that were not cleaned up.

[This mentor] asked us to help and we were going to get a drink of water and, um, she had got upset and she was like, ‘why do we always have to be . . . do that?’ But, like, even if we were to help, girls would’ve gotten upset with us for having black-bagged their stuff.

Samantha felt that this mentor got upset with her for not helping with something that ought to have been a staff responsibility. She also seemed to believe that this staff wanted to use her as a

means to ameliorate her personal work. As such, Samantha seemed to feel treated as a ‘means to an end’ by this mentor. While impossible to assess whether her interpretation of this experience is consistent with this staff member’s intentions, Samantha’s interpretation seems reasonable. Indeed, it would seem unusual for a student to be responsible for confiscating items belonging to other students. Samantha noted this as an example of a mentor not treating students “well.”

A few other students shared similar concerns. For example, Madison related that one staff member “got really angry at [her]” and “walked away” when Madison was trying to explain why she did not want to complete some chores. Madison then related the following exchange occurred: “‘Excuse me? Like, I know you can hear me. I’m a very loud person. Like, I know you can hear me.’ And [this mentor] just whipped around and she was like, ‘I’m treating you with the same respect that you treat me.’” Madison disagreed that she was treating this mentor with similar disrespect, feeling that this mentor was ignoring her and treating her in a less than caring manner. However, Madison and other students who complained about being treated instrumentally by mentors, also noted that this problem was uncommon and isolated to a few select mentors. While interacting with students on campus, I recorded that some students complained about “some of the mentors who they described as having their ‘heart in the right place,’ but as not knowing how to go about helping the girls.” These students seemed to believe that the mentors’ intentions remained good, despite sometimes “not knowing how” to respond with consistent relational caring.

In addition to feeling occasionally mistreated by select staff, students sometimes experienced their peers to be inconsiderate. For example, Grace related that she can be sensitive to loud noise (that this noise creates migraines) and that sometimes other students ignore her requests to quiet down. “I’ve asked people to be quiet a couple times, so, that’s probably when I

get the most frustrated.” Although Grace does not directly reflect on these peers not being considerate, a lack of consideration seems to be implied as she complains that others are loud and do not respond to her requests that they be more quiet. This would be especially true if these students understood how their noise impacted Grace. Though Grace, Madison, and Samantha relate feeling mistreated in these circumstances, each of these students generally described more thoughtful, virtuous relations at GBA.

This was not the case for Julie. Of the students I interviewed, Julie was the newest student, having only resided at GBA for one month. She seemed to be a particular exception to the students I interviewed in that she described not feeling much relational warmth and caring while at GBA. She related, “I’m not noticed unless I’m like really depressed and crying or something.” Julie also described only occasionally feeling cared about. Julie’s feeling unnoticed and uncared about is discordant with my own experience, the descriptions of others, and my observations on campus. She recognized, however, that it is entirely possible that she has not allowed others to be caring, pushing others away from her while at GBA. “I kinda do it to myself because I make myself all silent and like anti-social half the time.” Indeed this was consistent with an observation I made while on campus. Four days subsequent this interview I noticed Julie to be crying alone on campus. I inquired briefly about whether I could help her, and she asked to be left alone. Shortly after, three students discovered and converged on Julie, in an apparent act of caring concern. This experience seemed to match Julie description, that she primarily draws attention and concern from others when she displays intense emotions. In addition, Julie rejected my attempt to extend support. Perhaps Julie is partly accurate in her perception that she shares responsibility for pushing others away.

While students described a few possible exceptions to GBA's goal of prioritizing good relationships over instrumental relations, Julie's experience may actually lend more support to GBA's commitment to this goal. As a new student Julie's description may help illustrate her limited relational change in comparison to students with more experience at GBA. Additionally, there was recurrent evidence of students being met with considerable relational caring and other students strongly emphasized how deeply they felt cared about at GBA. Students seem to experience themselves and others as prioritizing virtuous relationships at GBA, in a manner quite disparate from previous experiences. Especially distinct was how interpersonal difficulties were met with relational concern, caring and fluidity was evident between peer subgroups, and community members were willing to give "tough love." In sum, student interviews, campus observations, and my direct interactions supported that students and staff demonstrated remarkable relational caring within the GBA community.

### **Feature Three: Fear of Rejection**

Relationists Slife and Wiggins (2009) posit that "Fear of rejection—the fear that we do not belong, are not acceptable, or do not have meaningful relations—is the greatest of all the fears and anxieties." (p. 20). In light of this claim, a relationist might expect these fears to be reflected in the meanings of these interviews given my inquiries about students' interpersonal relationships. So evidence that GBA students' fear interpersonal rejection would not necessarily indicate relational growth. Evidence of relational change, however, may be found in students' insight and response to this basic fear. Indeed, Slife and Wiggins suggest that "good psychotherapy outcome will be one that introduces or restores the client to community" (2009, p. 20) despite or because of fears of interpersonal closeness. In other words, one might expect students to seek meaningful relations despite their fears of rejection. In fact, the interviews

indicated a significant shift in how GBA's students respond to their relational fears, and provide examples of this shift. In particular, students described making themselves more open to intimate (i.e., close) relationships at GBA, despite these fears.

**Of becoming open to close relationships.** Prior to coming to GBA, students reported having fairly problematic relationships with others in that they felt unsafe, unsupported, and/or untrusting of others. In strong contrast, while at GBA they describe and provide examples of drawing closer to others. These students not only feel a sense of closeness, but also have come to rely and depend on others. Their experience seemed reflective of a community that fostered this openness through providing caring, reliable relationships.

Sophia, for example, describes opening herself up to "new relationships" as she has put her "guard down" at GBA, allowing herself to be more open and trusting.

I have a whole new level of openness and being okay around people.... I'm working on it, I'm not the best at trusting people or opening up or crying in front of people, or crying at all, but yeah, just getting there, and it's already changed significantly....before I got here, I was really good at isolating.

She also notes that she has become more receptive to hugging, talking with others, and other "little stuff." She considers this relatedness as "completely different" than she has previously experienced.

Sophia relates that she came to GBA with especial fears towards men, having previously experienced males to be controlling and abusive. While she notes developing trust with people generally, she has particularly come to interact differently with men while at GBA.

I'm growing more comfortable with \_\_\_\_\_ [the clinical director] wanting to be around me and wanting to just show me new experiences. And with \_\_\_\_\_, the cook, I would've

avoided any young man his age and wanted to stay so far away from someone like him, just cause it wouldn't be comfortable. But now, just being able to joke with him and be friends with him, it's completely different.

Sophia describes how she has become more “comfortable” with two different males at GBA. She sees herself as developing relational trust and increased closeness in these relationships. Sophia later related that her mom, who has visited campus, has also noticed her as becoming more open in relationships with males. This observation helps verify Sophia's relational change in this area.

Like Sophia, Jill discusses how she now allows others to “see more of me.” In the past she tried to hide her weaknesses from others. This could be interpreted as her being more vulnerable in relationships, despite fears of rejection.

I'm more open with like, my problems and stuff and when I'm going through a hard time.... I didn't try to like show any weakness before and now like, I'm okay with doing that. So I guess they can, they see more of me, and they know more of me, yeah.

Jill related that others can “see more” of her in relationships with others, especially her weaknesses. In this way Jill seems to be taking more interpersonal risks, allowing more increased closeness with others.

Madison seems to echo a similar sentiment, sharing how prior to her growth at GBA she has typically pushed others away: “I've always cared about people but I've never really been that vulnerable. So people always think, ‘Oh Madison doesn't like people. She hates people. She doesn't like me.’” She then related how their conclusion that she disliked others was not accurate. Rather, that was “just the mask I'm putting on so that others can't see the vulnerable side of me.” Here Madison described pushing relationships away due to her fears of intimacy.

She then related how she has become more caring, reaching out to others to invite rather than reject relationships.

Sophia, Jill, and Madison seem to find themselves more open and receptive to relationships. They seem to allow themselves to be seen by others and to care more, rather than retreating from genuine relationships. Other students shared similar sentiments, as they came allow themselves to embrace relationship with others, placing themselves at risk of interpersonal loss.

**Of fostering interpersonal risk-taking.** Experiencing deep, dependable caring at GBA seemed a vehicle of change for students, enabling a different response to their fears of rejection, which according to feature three is the strongest of all the human fears. As students experienced this caring they learned that others could be trusted students seemed to increasingly begin to take interpersonal risks.

Abby's experience returning to GBA after leaving for several months to receive some specialized treatment, was described previously. Upon returning to GBA she expected to be "hated," however, she was surprised to be received by intense warmth. Abby's warm welcome to campus remained quite salient to Abby's ensuing interpersonal engagement at GBA; indeed, Abby went on explain efforts to resist a previous tendency towards isolation and interpersonal resistance. In the past she reported "I [was] burning them I'm like, being annoying and being obnoxious I'm like, being too clingy so I just sort of, isolate" where now "it's pretty different like the isolating isn't, as much of an issue." Abby's description and example demonstrate her previous tendency to push others away when others reach out. She seems to be trying to change her response to others, who may reach out. Her self-assessment is that "isolation isn't as much of

an issue,” in that she no longer seems to isolate as she once did. She also describes feeling confident that others at GBA would be frankly honest with her, if she starts to push others away.

In addition to describing fewer tendencies towards isolation, Samantha also describes her willingness to engage in risky interpersonal activities. This particular activity risked humorous humiliation, and yet Samantha reflected on having fun with her therapist and some other girls despite this risk. In the past, she believes that she may have held back, for fear of embarrassment.

Mike took us, his girls to the river and we went rock-jumping. And I fell in the water quite a few times [laughs]. And it was just, like, one of those experiences that, like, it was fun and it wasn't something that I would've done before. . . . I wasn't afraid to be embarrassed. Like, I was soaking wet by the end of it, and it wasn't like. . . I didn't feel like they would laugh at me. Like, I was really paranoid before that people would just make fun of me.

Samantha was able to simply have fun with others, doing something that was outside her 'comfort zone.' This seems to reflect how she has come to relate to others, with more confidence and trust that she will not be rejected. Samantha and Abby's experience seems reflective of most other students who also shared and evidence a willingness to take interpersonal risks, reaching out to others despite fears of rejection.

**Of possible exceptions to feature three.** Overall, GBA students generally experienced themselves as taking increased risks towards developing interpersonal intimacy, as exemplified in the experiences of Sophia, Jill, Madison, Abby, and Samantha. In other words, most of the students I interviewed described having made growth in both facing their fears of rejection and toward developing more meaningful relationships. However, one student described continued difficulty, resisting relationships for fear of rejection.



As noted previously, Julie had one month of experience at GBA prior to my interview. She related continued difficulty relating and connecting to others at GBA. She stated, “I don’t feel kinda like connected to everyone, which I would like to feel.” After describing this sense of isolation, Julie continued by noting how she has contributed to this sense of isolation. She described a strong fear of rejection in relation to others as preventing her from engaging and feeling a sense of belonging at GBA.

I worry that like they might do me wrong like people have done in the past. And I worry that like I might not be the kind of person that they’d wanna like talk to. And I worry that like I might not be the person that they’d like consider a friend to them, even if they got to know them.

Julie resists interpersonal connection, due to strong fears of rejection while at GBA. In contrast, she was able to reflect on experiences previous to GBA wherein she was better able to connect with and be more vulnerable with others (including a previous treatment experience). However, more generally she describes having remained resistant to such vulnerability in relationships. Julie’s current resistance might be expected given Julie’s brief, limited experience in relational treatment. Indeed, unlike her peers Julie may not have had sufficient time to come to trust the genuineness of concern from the GBA community. Whereas, other students’ seem to have come to trust of the community’s concern.

While the other students I interviewed seemed to describe overall progress in addressing their fears of rejection, a few students shared that this process can remain challenging. Samantha, for example, described that at times she does not feel “heard” and “acknowledged” by others at GBA, similar to experiences of rejection in the past. She describes this feeding into “a belief” that others do not acknowledge her. A relationist might interpret this belief as a fear of rejection,

fearing that others do not notice and accept her in relationships. However, Samantha also recognizes that not everyone will respond to her the way that she wants, every time. “not everybody’s gonna treat me the way I wanna be treated. And like, there’s always gonna be those people who don’t believe what you say.” In saying this it seems that she is managing this fear of rejection in a more honest and reasonable manner. As reviewed previously, Samantha has improved her relational trust and engagement, despite this acknowledgement that she may be disappointed in some relationships.

Overall, students seem to describe considerable progress in facing and addressing their fears of rejection. Students describe taking increased interpersonal risks, being more genuine and engaged in relationships with others. Some described having fun with others in a manner that seemed too risky before. They have developed relationships with closeness and interpersonal intimacy, and by so doing have strengthened what Slife and Wiggins (2009) call “the meaning and fulfillment of closeness and community” (p. 20).

#### **Features Four and Nine: Humble Conceptions Based in Situated Contexts**

Slife and Wiggin’s (2009) assert that, “All clients must be understood ‘thickly,’ i.e., in relation to their interpersonal, temporal, situational, and moral contexts, which include the interpreting therapist” (pp. 20-21). They also contend that, “Others are never reducible or capturable. Consequently, therapists and clients must be humble about their conceptions and perceptions of others, because these conceptions are always incomplete and never final” (p. 22). The strong association between these features was clear in students’ descriptions and experiences. As will be shown, students described how they have come to better consider the larger context and stories of others, including their peers and GBA staff. In doing so they have become more careful to make judgments and tentative in their conceptions of others.

**Of considering others' larger, situated contexts.** Generally, students demonstrated a significant shift in how they view others, in that they see people in relation to their own history and situational context. This contextual shift seemed to create a sense of compassion, understanding, and patience with others. Specifically, students described situations where they feel confident that they would have been quite angered, offended, or off-put by others, whereas they now attempt to understand where that person is coming from.

For example, Sophia described how she has come to view others in relation to a more holistic context while at GBA. In lamenting the idea of saying goodbye to those who finish their treatment at GBA, Sophia shares how intimately she becomes acquainted with these peers: “getting to know people on a level I’ve never really had before. ...It’s a lot deeper and, again, knowing someone’s past and their patterns and belief systems, and how it plays into who they are today. And yeah, we all know each other on a really deep level.” Sophia feels like her relationships at GBA are closer and more ‘thickly’ situated than other relationships she has developed in the past.

Sophia then describes how understanding others affects her perceptions of others, including how she responds to someone who might upset her.

It’s hard to be or to stay mad at someone for doing something when you know that they did it because they grew up in a hard home or they did because of a past addiction or a past relationship, so it’s a whole new level of empathy and compassion for someone. Sophia notices that it is difficult to stay upset with someone when she views this person thickly. She notices that understanding others’ story, leads to more relational caring, understanding, and forgiveness.

Other students also described how they have come to value a contextually situated perspective. Jill shares that that she finds it important to see others thickly in response to me asking how she approaches differences with others: “Its like hard to understand it unless you, a-actually like, can see like what this person’s been through that made them this way.” Here Jill describes that it is important to understand what a person has “been through.” In saying this Jill seems to place value on viewing others’ in light of their history and context rather than taking a limited, narrow perspective. Jill later describes that GBA has helped her as she has been able to take a broader perspective “if I try and look at things in like a broader and more understanding perspective like, it’s a lot easier for me to like take advantage of things here.” In other words, Jill sees herself as benefiting from looking at things more holistically.

Leah also described trying to understand where others are coming from by considering their broader context. She noted that she tries to look at what she calls the “big picture” with others: “it’s like just looking at things deeper, looking at the bigger picture with people. Like looking into people and not just the surface level stuff.” In other words, Leah tries to understand the larger, situational context of others. Her compassion and perspective in seeing others is not solely grounded in their distant history, but also their present circumstances: “We have to be like patient with everybody else.... And I think, you know, just understanding that everybody is having their own day. Like you don’t know what could’ve happened in their day, you know?” Again, Leah not only considers others’ history, but also their present circumstances for understanding. This seems consistent with the relational idea of looking at other as densely situated, not only within a historical context, but also within one’s meaningful day-to-day circumstances. Leah suggests that looking at others as contextually situated leads to more compassion and patience.

Leah explained further how considering the larger context leads her to be more patient with others. Leah tries to remind herself that everyone has their struggles, when trying to understand where others are coming from. She shared an example of how she might put this understanding into action: “even like somebody who’s rude to you checking out at the grocery store.... It’s just like she’s dealing with stuff just like the rest of us, you know?” In describing this, Leah seemed to be both humble about her interpretations and to recognize the broader situational context of others. Even if she is not privy to the details of that broader context, she acknowledges that that it is relevant. With this broader context in mind, she is less likely to react harshly towards others; thus, finding herself to be more patient with others.

Additionally, students not only described valuing thick relations but also seemed to experience their GBA relationships as more sensitive to context. Madison, for example, contrasted how her relationships at GBA were more thickly situated than previous relationships. She described that she experiences her relationships at GBA to be less superficial in comparison to relationships in other contexts. “Cause once you learn why some people do things, it’s so much easier to get along with them. It is *so* [said with emphasis] much easier to get along with them, it’s amazing.” Madison notes that at GBA she has come to better understand “why” people act certain ways. This “why” is presumably situated in the broader context of her peers (e.g., their history and present circumstances). Madison notes that understanding this broader context, improves her relationship with others. Or to use Leah and Sophia’s words—she is more patient with others because she understands their history.

Madison not only sees herself as having more patience and understanding with her peers, but she also tries to consider where GBA staff may be coming from. Madison related how she tries to consider what it would be like to be in a mentor’s position:

I'm not saying that I enjoy being told what to do. I do not like when mentors walk away from me. But I'm more understanding that they have 50 girls here that they have to take care of...I have empathy and I step into their shoes. Would it be annoying if one girl wouldn't come down and help chores—help with chores. Yeah it would be annoying and yeah there are 40 other girls that could help.

Madison seems to perceive staff in respect to their broader, relational context. Rather than reacting with strong irritation when staff does not please her, she makes an effort to consider what it might be like to stand in their shoes. This example of considering others thickly seems especially notable because it includes authority figures. In other words, Madison is not only concerned about the situated context of her peers, but also of GBA staff members.

Taken together, these students seem to reflect value that the larger GBA community's places value on and have practiced treating others with humble conceptions. Students seem to find this practice as drawing out more compassion and patience with others. Another way that students seemed to come to view others humbly—situated within thick relation contexts—was through their leadership opportunities on campus.

**Of leadership opportunities helping students see others thickly.** Some of the students described and demonstrated how serving on GBA's relational council has encouraged growth on features four and nine, that perceiving others as thickly situated leads to humble conceptions. Indeed this leadership opportunity has helped these students to see others as densely situated. While serving on the relational council students are placed, temporarily, in a position to evaluate others in the community, even recommending progress through the program's aspirations. In so doing, students were required to consider the larger situational context of their peers. This led them to naturally want to support and help others. It may be important to note that serving on the

council is a rotating responsibility on campus. My understanding was that most, if not all, students serve on this council during their time at GBA. Some described this leadership experience as impacting how they look at others long-term. Specifically, they become more aware and sensitive to the larger context and challenges of those around them.

Grace, for example, noted that leadership responsibilities have provided her a broader context to understand her peers on campus. She described that her experience on relational council “kind of encouraged me, I think, to be more aware of the whole community and just, what was going on with different girls. . . . [T]hat kind of gives you more context to then really see what’s going on with more clarity.” Grace described relational council as helpful to her understanding others thickly by providing her more contextual information about other students. It also put Grace in a unique position to consider this information as a peer leader--to reflect on their progress in light of their larger circumstances.

I recorded some perceptions as I observed the relational council meet with a couple GBA students (one at a time). I recorded that students on the council, “did a good job asking for specifics from girls that came into council [with] lots of specific questions and asking for examples.” Indeed, as described by Grace, the council seemed to be a venue for students to really consider each other thickly. I similarly noted that the council was very “specific” in the feedback they provided to students they counseled, drawing upon the details of their daily interactions. Again, this feedback seemed densely situated within the day-to-day interactions and occurrences at GBA.

As a result of her time on council, Grace recalled feeling a “really strong sense of just community in general. Umm, because, I mean your whole job on council is to kind of be there for the community.” As a result, Grace recalls feeling additional commitment to the larger

community. She saw it as her responsibility (i.e., “job”) to act on behalf of the larger community—a strong commitment to the relational whole.

Finally, Grace reflected that this experience has had a lasting impact saying, “it’s made me more aware of what’s going on with other people and just the general sort of vibe in the community. . . . I think, that experience also gave me more confidence to sort of, umm, be a leader in certain ways . . . and, you know, to be there for other people without worrying about, like, intruding.” Grace believes that the council has helped her become more aware of others and perhaps more sensitive to their situational context. It has also helped her develop leadership skills, specifically to be available to others rather than be overly cautious about intruding into others’ lives.

In sum, Grace’s experience seems reflective of others, and consistent with my own observations at GBA. Participating on the leadership council was particularly helpful in providing students at GBA an opportunity to see others as situated thickly. It seemed to place students in a position of caring about their peers and championing their progress from a unique vantage point. In particular, they learned to widen their understanding of their peers’ present, historical, and cultural context.

**Of flexible, humble perceptions.** A shift towards more humble, changeable perceptions was another reflection of features four and nine, the relational valuing of situated and thick understanding of others that leads to more tentative conceptions. In fact many of these tentative conceptions were implicit in many of the students’ descriptions discussed above. These examples combined with others that I will review demonstrate how GBA students have become more understanding of others as they view others more holistically. These students seemed to look at the larger context and ‘stories’ of others. They are less apt to rigidly critique or label others.



Jill described this perspective as she noted the importance of viewing others thickly rather than stereotyping others. Her description was in response to me asking how she approaches differences with others. “I mean yeah like with stereotypes about like, the therapy world and just like, you know its like hard to understand it unless you, a- actually like, can see like what this person’s been through that made them this way.” Jill describes that it is important to understand what a person has “been through.” In saying this Jill seems to place value on viewing others’ in respect to their history and context rather than taking a limited, narrow perspective.

In turn, Jill also notes how others have sometimes perceived her in a narrow manner: “I guess I’m [seen] like that too. . . . I would seem different like, just hearing about the way I was, and not, I guess understanding like, what I went through.” Here, Jill suggests that others have viewed her in a stereotyped manner, without understanding her complexly. Jill clearly places value on having humble, changeable perceptions of others. These perceptions ought to be situated thickly within others’ situational histories.

Madison noted how she too has learned to be tentative in her perceptions. She acknowledged that her reaction to conflictual situations relies “mostly [on] my perception of that person.” In other words, she sees her perception as critical to her manner of responding and implicitly notes that she may be wrong in her perception. Madison seems to join with Jill in recognizing the importance of humble perceptions of others, also reflecting how the larger GBA community seemed careful of stereotypes and their perceptions of others.

In addition to students who described shifting their perceptions of others, one student noted moving toward a more tentative perception of her own history. Sophia described how hearing the “stories” of other students has helped her reconsider her own story:

[J]ust hearing other girls' stories that . . . about their fathers or sharing mine about abuse and having other people being able to relate and kind of . . . it just clicked in my head. . . . the perception of [my father's abuse] changed completely from being . . . a scared kid and now being a woman who's okay with looking at it and okay with knowing that it was someone else's wrongdoing.

As she heard the stories of those around her, Sophia reappraised the responsibility associated with her father's abuse. Perhaps in feeling compassion and sympathy for other students who described being abused, she understood that she too was not responsible for her father's abuse of her. She described herself as looking at her history now as a "woman" rather than through the eyes of a "scared kid." This imagery suggests a dramatic shift in her perception of the past.

Humble conceptions and perceptions of others were also evident in my direct experiences of the daily interactions and programming at GBA. Especially relevant is what was noticeably missing from my written observations. There was very little evidence of staff or students reducing others to stereotypes, labels, and other rigid perceptions.

While I will later review one potential exception, there otherwise was a relative absence of abstract labels and generalized conceptions. Rather, I noted how staff talked about students at GBA in a generous and understanding manner. As I summed up my impressions the day after departing GBA, I noted the caring atmosphere of GBA at nearly "all levels." I then recorded how this seemed different from other treatment program I have been exposed to:

Having previously worked with a few programs (admitted[ly] none have been strictly female) with behavior disordered/struggling youth this [caring] was unprecedented for me. Not that others [in other programs] have not cared, but that this caring is evident so extensively. Particularly surprising and different was that I never heard staff speak

derisively about students behind closed doors, nor [did they speak] negatively about one another. This seemed felt by the students.

In other words, I experienced staff to speak in a very caring, concerned manner about students. This was without overgeneralized or critical labels that I have often heard in previous treatment settings. This caring and avoidance of labels seemed directly felt by students, who generally seemed to feel cared about by staff (see results related to feature 2).

On two separate occasions GBA staff discussed labels with me while I was on campus, though both of these staff members reflected a cautious approach to labels. In the first, I had explicitly asked about the presenting treatment concerns for the students I was considering interviewing. Given this request, the headmaster shared with me diagnostic labels that were provided to GBA prior to student's admittance. Notably the headmaster had to dig through some paperwork to locate these concerns. It seemed clear that these concerns were not of primary importance in his conceptualization and relationship of these GBA students. As described previously, I noticed this headmaster to be quite intimately involved in the details of the program and to have strong relations with GBA students. In other words, while this administrator seemed to know most GBA students quite well, it was clear that he did not primarily identify, understand, or relate to these students in terms of their diagnostic labels. Rather, he seemed to relate to them from within the 'warp and woof' of their daily experiences together.

Secondly, the special education teacher at GBA talked to me about labels that were used to qualify students for special education services. She noted that while these labels provide students with educational services, she purposely does not share these labels with students or teachers. Rather, she prefers to describe areas that teachers can provide extra assistance to particular students. She described, "worrying about the effects of labels and types of labels

[used].” She has found some special education labels (e.g., emotionally disturbed) to be rather harsh. This teacher takes especial care not to reify these labels. She described this approach as based in her “own philosophy.” She confirmed that she found this philosophy consistent with relationists concern that labels are incomplete abstractions. She described that labels “tend to have over-extend[ing] consequences.” Like the headmaster, this schoolteacher, seemed to treat labels with caution and view students more thickly than labels portray.

In all, GBA students and staff seemed to look at the larger context and ‘stories’ of others, and were less apt to harshly critique and label others. Indeed, members of the GBA community proved to be quite humble in their perceptions and conceptualizations of others. This seems consistent with relationists’ valuing of client’s situated experiences over abstract conceptualizations.

**Of a few possible exceptions to features four and nine.** Generally, students described in this manuscript reported feeling understood by others in a more situated and holistic manner. However, a few students lamented that they do not always experience GBA in this manner. One student described feeling stereotyped while some others lamented hurtful gossip. Furthermore, one student complained of being labeled by myself and a staff member during one of my informal interactions with a group of GBA students

Grace explicitly shared how she sometimes feels like she is stereotyped at GBA. She seems to feel that other students’ conception of her is overly simplified and fixed.

I struggle with like, feeling like, a fair number of people, may perceive me in like, a sort of, two-dimensional, like, stereotype of like, the good girl or something that’s not really a full picture of who I am... more like people seeing me as like, the like, sort of, ‘rule-

following' like, more like a 'good girl' in that respect...I think sometimes peoples' image of me doesn't really reflect, you know, the complexity of a real person.

Even at GBA, Grace seems to feel relegated to particular, stereotyped role by others. She describes others' conceptions of her as "two-dimensional," considering her to be a "rule following...good girl." She describes well, how this image does not reflect her actual complexity.

Other potential evidence for another form of stereotyping at GBA, included students complaint of gossiping that occurs at GBA. For example, while discussing how she feels connected at GBA, Samantha laments that there is too much gossip.

Like, there tends to be a lot of gossip and things like that that I don't like to get involved in. Like, because I've been on the other side of the gossip, where people are gossiping about me. And so, I just never thought. . . saw that as a benefit, or anything, and so I try to keep out of the drama here. Um, and like, not be drawn into it.

While not describing the details of the gossip she overhears at GBA, Samantha notes that there can be a "lot of gossip." It may be fair to assume that this gossip, like most gossip, includes negative, stereotypical portrayals of students at GBA.

Interestingly, Samantha and Grace, like most other students I interviewed noted their attempts to avoid gossip and stereotyping. It seems that most, if not all, of the students I interviewed would like to avoid this practice. Yet given the ease of returning to old habits, perhaps even these students occasionally speak pejoratively about their peers, without even noticing. The phrase, 'old habits die hard,' may fit the difficulty of learning to avoid this common behavior. That GBA's students have become sensitive to the effects of stereotyping, and want to avoid gossip is, itself, evidence of relational sensitive and progress.

I recorded one informal interchange that seems an example of a student who felt unfairly labeled. While playing cards with some of GBA students after lunch, one of the staff members inquired whether these students intended to go back to school. I then recorded an interchange between the students and me:

I asked if I was contributing to [their] delinquency and one girl said no, while another [complained about] being called a delinquent today [by me], after another staff had apparently called her a negative name earlier in the day.

While this interchange was somewhat light hearted, this student seemed to express feeling some actual offense in my statement and in the apparent statement of another staff. It is notable that I had not labeled the students “delinquents” though she interpreted it this way. It is impossible to know if the staff she referred to as calling her another negative name might also have been misinterpreted. Regardless, it is clear that this student, as with most adolescents, was sensitive to even the hint of being labeled harshly. This student aptly illustrated the problematic aspect of such reductions, as she is likely reacting to this label as incomplete or inaccurate.

It is notable that this was the only time I recorded that staff might have labeled students in this manner. As described above, I was generally struck by an absence of this, even when I interacted with staff without students present. Generally the GBA community seemed quite disinclined to treat others in an objectified and stereotyped manner. Rather, as illustrated above, students and staff seemed to receive each other in an interested manner, one that sought to understand the historical and situated complexity of others. In doing so students noticed themselves and others to be more patient with others and their perceptions became more flexible.

### **Feature Five: Responsibility and Human Agency**

Slife and Wiggins' fifth feature of relationality states: "Part of the temporality of all contexts is possibilities, implying that a relational human agency is important (along with the responsibility it implies)." (2009, p. 21) For a relationist, agency is always situated thickly within one's context. A person's context allows for possibilities and limitations. Slife and Wiggins contend that clients often feel restricted or "stuck," as if their possibilities are limited by symptoms that lead them to treatment. The relationist is thus interested in helping clients "attend to this 'stuckness' and to explore with clients what limited responsibility they bear for their situation." (Slife and Wiggins, 2009, p. 21) In other words, successful treatment may help open possibilities and opportunities for clients, such that they feel more responsibility for their lives.

As will be shown, some students described GBA as providing more freedom than they expected or have experienced at previous programs. Students talked about becoming more actively responsible for their own choices and the consequences that naturally follow because of this increased freedom. They felt that this was helping prepare them to take active responsibility for themselves when they leave GBA.

**Of natural consequences and assuming responsibility.** Students I interviewed seemed to distinguish their experience at GBA in saying that there were few, if any, contrived consequences at GBA. Students' participated in school and daily programing willingly, despite little evidence of token reinforcements or punishments to 'shape' their behavior. In turn, students seemed to describe themselves as becoming intrinsically motivated, rather than acting for extrinsic benefits or ends.

Behavioral modification efforts, with contrived means of reinforcing or punishing student behaviors, were noticeably absent at GBA. As I concluded my week at GBA I recorded, "There

was very little staff ‘managing’ of student behavior (like through reinforcements or consequences) at all to be seen on campus. Rather the community seemed to manage itself, with girls reminding/helping other students and monitoring themselves.” Throughout the week I observed students moving freely without constant supervision, volunteering to help with chores, and attended class and groups on their own volition. (It seems notable that this was the case, even in a community of students who were admitted due to their psychological and behavioral difficulties.) The community helped to manage itself through a variety of formal and informal forums of providing relational feedback to one another. Students would both praise each other’s efforts and address concerns with students who were struggling to engage.

One GBA administrator I spoke with specifically explained how GBA’s “tickets” were not intended as a behavioral reinforcement system. Rather, it was intended to provide students relational feedback for things they deemed positive or negative. This system was without other extrinsic benefits or consequences. Briefly described, staff would write positive and negative observations of different students during the week on these tickets. Staff were explicitly asked to keep these tickets silent, until accumulated and reviewed at the end of the week. Even when reviewed, tickets were not exchanged for additional privileges or other consequences, rather they were seen as a way to noticing trends, themes, and patterns as feedback for students and the community to benefit from. These tickets were also a way and to let students know that others were noticing their efforts, even in silence.

While students were encouraged, even expected, to participate in school and other daily programming at GBA, there was little evidence of pressure, offering incentives, rewards, or threats of punishment. Rather, there was a strong community value of freedom. The students seemed to understand that there would be natural consequences to their actions (e.g., not attending school



means that a student would not pass her classes). Certainly there was also a sense that students' decision about whether to actively engage in the program and meet daily expectations would affect their progress through the program. However, this was implicitly understood rather than staff imposing behavioral reinforcement efforts towards students achieving this end.

Indeed, Grace seemed to distinguish GBA from other programs (e.g., behavioral modification treatment programs). She experienced GBA as providing her greater freedom due to there being fewer contrived consequences. Instead, she sees GBA as emphasizing the natural consequences of students' actions.

One of the things that it seems to me. . . . makes Greenbrier different from other places is they sort of are like, looser in some ways than other programs like, they don't really believe in, like, punishments and they don't like keep on top of us at every second to make sure we're doing what we're supposed to be doing. . . . It's sort of more about natural consequences rather than like, 'We're gonna punish you if you don't do this.' For Grace, she feels less 'hounded', in that she is more responsible for her actions than having others consistently directing her behaviors. She acknowledges that her actions still have consequences at GBA, however these seem less contrived. In other words, students at GBA are learning to be responsible for the natural consequences of their actions.

Similar to Grace, Madison distinguishes her experience here at GBA from other programs in how consequences are meted out. She agrees that GBA relies on natural consequences to actions, rather than contrived consequences.

Um the experiences in my other programs, they made you do things and then give you consequences for, whatever. But here, it's more natural consequences . . . if I don't do my

homework, I get bad grades. And if I get bad grades, it leads to me not graduating when I want to graduate and things like that.

Madison not only interprets the consequences to her actions as being natural, but is able to anticipate what the “real life” consequences would be if she chooses not to do her homework.

Madison also provided a specific contrast between her experience at GBA and a previous treatment program she attended. “[At] my last program . . . I wish they would’ve let me figure it out more for myself and let me understand the natural consequences of things . . . if I refused to get out of bed, I couldn’t go see the horses that day.” Madison notes that her previous treatment program removed desired privileges if Madison did not comply with the expectations of the program. However, in Madison’s mind there was not a clear relationship between her behavior and the given consequence.

In contrast, she goes on to describe how GBA allows the natural consequences of her actions to take place.

And here . . . if I was having a really bad day and I couldn’t get out of bed, if getting out to the barn would help me, they would let it happen. And not getting out of bed means that I would miss breakfast, I would miss PE, meaning my grades would go down, and there’s this whole chain of things that would go wrong.

Madison is able to describe a chain of natural consequences that would likely occur if she did not attend school at GBA. Again, the difference between these consequences and those at her last program is that they seem less contrived. Because of this Madison perceived them as less punitive. She interpreted the consequences at her previous program as “not fair.”

Describing these previous consequences as punitive, Madison noted how she experienced this program using “fear” to impact her behaviors.

[GBA is] not powered by fear like my other program. . . . I would be perfect so that I could go see the horses and I had a mask on the whole time because it was like, ‘I’m perfect, blah blah blah blah’. But here they’re not saying that I have to put a mask on and it’s just—it’s my option. If I really don’t think I can get up that morning, they don’t think it’s okay, but they’re not gonna tell me that I can’t go to the barn.

Madison experiencing her previous program as motivating through fear led her to put “a mask on the whole time,” trying to appear perfect. Madison seemed to feign a willing compliance to avoid negative consequences when faced with more punitive and contrived consequences. In contrast, she sees GBA’s approach as helping her become accountable for herself, “because in a sense they’re asking me to do [things] and it’s all my option.” Like others I interviewed, Madison seems to feel that at GBA she has more of a sense of choice about things. She sees herself as having genuine choices to make at GBA, rather than feeling compelled by fear to act in a particular manner.

Similar to Madison, Grace went on to describe how GBA’s manner of meting out consequences alters her practical experience of relational agency:

It makes for an environment where there’s a lot more freedom, which is nice cause it doesn’t make being here feel so much like a punishment, which it’s not. Umm, but also, I mean, in the real world no one is gonna give you a ‘timeout’ if you don’t, you know, do certain things. So I think that it’s ultimately more effective.

Grace experiences GBA as providing more freedom than perhaps she would expect at a boarding school. One might expect youth in treatment programs, such as GBA, likely to complain about their lack of freedom. However, Grace relates feeling more room to make choices and be responsible for her choices, in a way that prepares her for the “real world.” Thus she sees this

approach as more “effective” or helpful to her and her peers. Indeed this sentiment seemed shared amongst the students, with many seeing GBA as better helping them prepare to take responsibility for their life after leaving GBA.

Even Julie, who did not evidence much relation change on the other relational features, described that GBA has helped her take responsibility for her choices. Recall that when I interviewed Julie, she had limited experience at GBA having resided on campus about one month. Generally, she was uncertain, even doubtful, that this program would be helpful to her. Yet in this regard, she emphatically noted how GBA has helped her take greater personal responsibility for the decisions.

It’s good for me to like be in school where in a way like I’m the one that wakes myself up, I’m the one that gets myself out of bed instead of my mom coming, yelling at me for like an hour until I get up... I’m responsible for my work, if I miss a day my mom can’t just call in and be like ‘she was sick, she doesn’t need her work done.’

Julie has found that GBA requires her to take more responsibility for her school attendance and work. In contrast, her mom took primary responsibility for her schooling even helping to excuse her non-attendance, when she lived at home. By saying “it’s good for me” Julie seems to frame her taking more responsibility as progress—that she is taking increasing responsibility for herself.

Julie continued by differentiating her attitude of attending school now from the past: [Now] I look kinda like towards the things that could happen if I did well.... It’s the fact that like I want to do good that gets me up every morning. . . . I started feeling a little more responsible for I—for what I was doing, and that made me like wanna do good, ‘cause good things come to people who do good things.

Here, Julie emphasizes that she is feeling more responsible for her actions and is increasingly motivated by a desire to do “good,” rather than being motivated by a fear of certain contrived consequences. She sees possibilities that will open to her if she attends school and becomes more responsible for herself. This is consistent with relationists’ goal to open possibilities and opportunities for clients as they assume personal responsibility.

Leah’s description of the way GBA is governed adds additional insight into the relational consistency of GBA’s approach to rules and consequences. She described feeling like the rules at GBA are a result of the choices of the community at large and that as a result she “can’t really complain” about these rules. In other words, rules are reflective of what students do to push the limits on campus. “I mean I feel like we make our own rules like here, like when somebody messes up and something happens, our rules set in place when people can’t take on a certain privilege, you know?”

Leah sees the rules as justified even if she is not directly responsible. Implied in this is a sense of shared responsibility. Leah went on to give a concrete example of how GBA’s rules are impacted by the students choices: “If we’re allowed to have casual Fridays, which right now we are, and a bunch of people start wearing shirts with their boobs hanging out and really short skirts, then obviously they’re going to take that away from us.” Again, Leah shares how the rules at GBA do not seem arbitrary, but rather a reflection on the larger community.

Feeling limited as a consequence of another’s decision or actions could easily upset many teenagers. Rather, Leah sees GBA’s expectations and rules as almost authored by the community as a whole. In fact, she continues by saying, “I can’t really complain about any of [the rules], even though, you know, it wasn’t my fault directly that like certain rules are set in place.”

Though she may not be directly responsible for each GBA rule, she sees the rules as reflective of the overall community, and thus sees the rules as quite justified.

Taken together, my observations and the student accounts demonstrate that as a whole GBA's students felt a unique, unexpected sense of freedom and personal responsibility for their decisions at GBA. Students almost seemed jarred by their experience at GBA in that they expected to be met with strict oversight with a formal system for reinforcing and punishing their behaviors. Not only were students' experiences discordant from their expectations, but also I found myself quite surprised by the extent of the value GBA placed on students' freedom. I did not anticipate that an adolescent treatment program could run so smoothly with such minimal constraints (e.g., students walking across campus freely, deciding for themselves how and when they participated). Upon leaving GBA, I inquired about my surprise while talking to the headmaster, questioning and reflecting on how GBA manages to operate so well without more constraints on freedom or a more formal behavioral modification system. Yet students noted how the absence of this system directly resulted at informing them to take more responsibility for their choices. In turn, students seemed to open additional possibilities and opportunities, consistent with relationists' stated objectives (Richardson et al. 1999; Slife and Wiggins, 2009).

**Of taking responsibility in interpersonal relationships.** Beyond describing GBA as a place to develop increased responsibility for one's choices, some students shared that they are taking more active responsibility for their interpretations in relation to others. As such, this finding reflects on the especially relational aspects of feature five's emphasis on human agency. Students seem to closely consider more carefully how responsibility is shared in conflictual relationships with others. Additionally, students describe taking relational responsibility for the more general impact they have on those around them, including how they can help others.

For example, Madison described that she is part of a larger whole and that her actions are reflected in that whole (rather than self-contained). She also reported taking responsibility for how her actions impact her larger relational context.

I've changed the way that I act because I have a strong presence is what everyone says and people really pay attention to what I have to say and what I do. . . . Cause when I'm in a good mood, the community is in a good mood and when I'm in a bad mood, the community is in a bad mood.

While said with some apparent exaggeration, Madison seems to be taking responsibility for how she impacts those around her. She has received feedback from others about her impact on the whole—that her actions have strong relational consequences on others. While her mood may not impact the community as broadly as she has stated (likely, she is not *alone* responsible for the mood of the community), I observed her to have a “strong presence” in the community. I experienced Madison as quite gregarious, and as a leader (formally and informally) who was widely involved in the community. I could easily imagine her mood to significantly impact the larger community.

Another student, Sophia, described how she had come to take more responsibility for her interpretations in relationship to others. She discussed a time she confronted GBA's clinical director, after feeling threatened by him. She owned most of the responsibility for feeling upset at him. She related how this was a growing experience for her to recognize how she had interpreted his intentions poorly.

I had let a little hair of an idea grow into this huge fear of mine, that he was trying to be my next dad and he was gonna hurt me like my dad did. And getting angry at something that wasn't logical and taking it so far, and I didn't need to.

Sophia, like others students, seemed to be taking responsibility for her interpretation, and in this case for overreacting. She came to believe that she allowed a small idea to “grow” into a larger fear, and in this way, describes herself as responsible for this problematic interpretation.

Grace also talked about her responsibility in relationship with others. She subtly suggested that there is a shared responsibility between herself and others in regards to the problems between them. Returning to how she addressed other students as perceiving her in a “two dimensional” manner, Grace first acknowledged her potential contribution to other’s perceptions of her:

I think that, sometimes, like, my own, like, lack of confidence or, you know, being comfortable, or whatever, can make me sort of, I guess, a little bit polite and distant, or something, which could, contribute to that sort of image.

Grace sees herself as contributing to this image, in that she seems to act overly polite and distant from others.

She then continues by describing the fears that others may have that contribute to them treating her “two dimensionally.”

[S]ince I’ve been here I’ve thought about, you know, how, you know how their own things could contribute to them seeing things that way, like, being afraid of, you know maybe being judged by me. Just like I don’t want to be judged by them.

In this case, it would be convenient and self-serving to displace all blame on the others, but Grace seems to be explicitly resisting to do so. She seems to both acknowledge specific ways that she may be contributing to their relational difficulties, i.e., her lack of confidence leads her to be a “bit polite and distant” as well as the potential contributions of others—because they may be afraid of being judge by Grace. Even in talking about the contribution of others to this



problem, Grace seems to take an understanding tone. She relates their potential fears to her own fears, stating that it is likely that both persons fear judgment from the other. Like Grace, GBA students seemed quite apt to carefully consider their own contributions to interpersonal difficulties, and sometimes nuance this in light of the contributions of others.

Some students seemed to see themselves as becoming increasingly more aware of their overall impact on those around them. They actually contemplated how they personally contributed to others' difficulties, while considering how other people can also contribute to others' difficulties. Grace describes that the leadership role at GBA helped her feel more responsible for others and less fearful of "intruding" into their lives. She indicates that this role encouraged her to become involved with others even after her responsibility on relational council was finished.

[O]n council it's kind of, you know, your job to see where people are at in the community and to see if there's anything you can do to help them.... [H]aving it sort of being made my business kind of made me realize a little bit that, you know, it was okay to make it my business even without officially being on council.

Relational council almost necessitated that Grace feel a sense of responsibility and service towards others in the community. After being on relational council she maintained this sense of concern and responsibility. She has been less hesitant to care about others, resisting her to fears of intruding.

Grace, along with her peers, describe that they are taking increased responsibility in their relationships with others. Students more carefully consider how they contribute to conflicts or problems in these relationships, as well as how they can more fairly interpret and best serve others.

**Of one possible exception to feature five.** While students generally saw GBA as helping them more fully take responsibility for themselves, one student felt that GBA might benefit from providing even more opportunities for students to make decisions. She described that GBA restricts access to real world challenges. She wonders if students would benefit from having access to these potential problems, in order to prepare them to live autonomously after leaving GBA.

Despite having complimented GBA for allowing for more freedom and individual accountability than she expected, Grace also described a desire for more “exposure to the real world” as she progressed through GBA’s program. Grace described that GBA provides students increasing privileges and freedoms inside and outside the GBA community as they progress through the program. This helps prepare them for transition when they leave. Yet, she believes that GBA could benefit from providing her and others even more opportunities to be accountable for themselves.

[I]f there was something I would change about the Greenbrier approach, umm, I guess maybe it would be like, having more exposure to the real world and more, like, you know, cause there’s sort of this, like, little Greenbrier brother—bubble. . . . Not even for, like, the privileges themselves. More for just like, the, you know, ability to be more accountable for myself, so that it’s less of a transition.

Grace feels that she would benefit from even more of the opportunities to make decisions. She notes that she is not primarily interested in having extra privileges, which could be interpreted as a hedonistic desire. Rather, she is interested in preparing to live in the real world. She notes wanting to be “more accountable for myself.” This speaks to her desire to develop personal responsibility.

Grace shared a specific example of how rules in the program may hinder her ability to develop personal responsibility, in the manner she was describing.

[L]ike my computer for instance, like, I'm not here because I spent too much time on my computer. But it is something that like, I've had trouble with sometimes, like getting distracted, doing other stuff on the Internet when I'm supposed to be doing my work and stuff. And I don't really have a problem with that here, because the rules kind of prevent me from doing that and I'm good at following the rules. But, I'd rather, you know, have the freedom to develop some of those—doing some of those skills on my own.

From Grace's perspective, she would like to have even more opportunities to make choices, and to learn to manage her life. She notes being good at "following the rules" and recognizes that many of the rules of GBA will not continue as she transitions into the "real world." In sum, she would like more freedoms at GBA to enable her to make her own decisions.

Grace emphasizes that she and others would benefit from more chances to fail while in GBA's supportive environment, "[I]t would be better, you know, to struggle with [difficult choices], or, even relapse while you're here in this supportive environment where you can learn, you know, how to do something different next time and where you can recover from it..." She sees the GBA environment as uniquely positioned to support students through making mistakes and to recover from a "relapse." Grace thinks that having additional opportunities for short-term risks will expand her opportunities and better prepare her for the "real world."

The value that Grace places on GBA being a good place to experience making choices and learn from one's mistakes is consistent with the larger mission of GBA—to help students change from within a caring environment. A relationist may see relational growth evident in Grace's expressed desire for more opportunities to make choices for the sake of becoming

increasingly accountable for herself. Indeed, her stated desire for increased opportunities for success and failure, and to learn from these experiences, seems consistent with GBA's relational goals.

However, GBA likely has to be measured in the freedoms allowed, taking into consideration the problem girls involved, the larger community, and the program's liability. Some of the freedoms that Grace may want may not be reasonable or safe. For example, Grace also noted that she thinks that students could benefit from being allowed to attend activities where alcohol is served, explaining that it is unreasonable to think that students will not face similar situations in the future. In this case, the liability and risk of failure may be too high for a program like GBA.

In sum, students experienced GBA as an environment that enhanced their ability to make and bear responsibility for their decisions, within a larger relational context. Students were surprised to find GBA without a system of contrived behavioral reinforcements. Instead they found it to be an environment where they were accountable for the natural and relational consequences of their actions. Students described GBA as a supportive environment that allowed them to make and learn from their mistakes. They repeatedly commented how increased freedoms at GBA encouraged rather than prevented them to act more responsibly, better preparing them for living outside of GBA's supportive environment. In this way, GBA may be opening a wide-range of opportunities and possibilities for students who likely arrived at GBA on a rather problematic trajectory.

### **Feature Eight: Differences Strengthening Relationships**

Slife and Wiggins (2009) posit that "Relationships are not solely based on sameness (e.g., agreement, matching); difference or 'otherness' is vital to individual identity and intimacy." Slife

and Wiggins contend that oft times clients approach relationships by attempting to appear more similar to others, even believing that they must do so to be accepted. This may violate a client's authenticity, and restrict or limit his or her relationships. From a relational perspective differences are as vital in relationships with others as similarities. Successful treatment, then, may support a client in approaching differences and embracing the 'otherness' of others. A relationist would argue that this would result in more authentic and intimate relations.

As will be shown, GBA students seemed to describe that relational differences are valued at GBA, often in a manner unlike they have experienced previously. Students also seemed to describe an interaction between differences and similarities, in that they see common human experiences as threading through many of their differences with others. For many students these commonalities seemed to help them relate to and be understanding of others' differences. Finally, students I interviewed reflected on how they have come to approach differences that they experience with others, especially differences that they previously found bothersome. In doing so students noticed how direct discussion and reconciliation of these differences often seemed to lead to closer relations with others.

**Of valuing differences.** First, several students seemed to talk about how they value differences and uniqueness between people. This seemed to reflect how the GBA community, as a whole, valued 'otherness.' Consistent with a relational philosophy, they seem to see differences as enhancing their relationships with others. One student described how unlike other contexts, differences are embraced at GBA rather than being rejected.

Jill generally noted appreciating differences between herself and others, "I guess I appreciate like, diversity and like uniqueness like, I like differences like I like there being like, so many different people? I like having all these like weird, like unique distinct traits." Jill describes

valuing “diversity” and “uniqueness” in relation to others. This attitude seems very similar to the relational idea that differences are valuable and meaningful. This attitude seemed quite shared amongst students at GBA.

Beyond a general appreciation for others’ differences, Samantha described her relationships benefiting from differences with other students. “There’s definitely a lot to do with being similar, but sometimes, like, knowing that they’re different, like, they have different struggles, and like, they’ve been able to overcome theirs, and like, having them help me through mine because of the insight that they can give me.” While agreeing that she had become especially close to some of her peers due, in part, to similarities they share, Samantha also emphasizes meaningful differences that strengthen her relatedness to others. Like others I interviewed, Samantha sees herself as being served by these differences, particularly noting the different nature of the struggles that they have worked through. She notices that the “different struggles” that others have “overcome,” seem to enable others to help Samantha with her unique difficulties.

Sophia described how she perceives differences in others. Typically, she says that she does not seem to notice differences with others: “I don’t notice too much the differences, I try to focus on similarities and why I would be good friends with them instead of why I wouldn’t.” Here, Sophia addressed how she tries to focus on the similarities of others. She prefers to consider reasons to draw closer to others, rather than reasons to distance herself from others. In part, Sophia’s comments seem to reflect the individualist notion that similarities are the preferred means for drawing her closer to others. Relationists might argue that differences are as important as similarities in developing closeness. However, she then continued by noting that she also values differences in others, calling them interesting. “But it’s interesting for me to like see the

little quirks in people that make them who they are, even if they're completely different from mine. But, yeah, it's interesting, the girls here are all so different." Here, she seems to describe these differences as creating the "otherness" of others, and seems to suggest that she values this otherness. In sum, it seems that Sophia both values commonality and difference in her relationships with others, and this is consistent with a relational position.

Sophia also noted a distinct difference in how the GBA community, as a whole, receives other students, in terms of differences. She contrasted her GBA experience, against her experience within her family and previous friends. She first notes that she and her sisters use to be outcasts: "I've always been an outcast in my whole family. The girls in the family have always been the nerds that study all the time and don't have many friends." Being different made her feel rejected. She then describes herself as also being different among the GBA community:

I've kind of gone into, not a similar pattern [at GBA], but just being different. And I'm open to it and I think girls are really accepting of just knowing how each girl works and knowing that I'm just really different from a lot of girls. And some of the girls are really different from each other and just, the changes are pretty embraced here. And the differences.

While at GBA she has noticed her uniqueness is welcomed by others. In fact, differences among all the students seemed to be accepted, even "embraced."

Taken together these students seem to suggest (at least conceptually) that relational differences are quite valued at GBA. Students appreciate diversity in others, and seem to indicate that both similarities and differences are important in relationships. One student even related how the GBA community especially embraces differences, unlike her previous experience outside of GBA.

**Of similarities among differences.** In addition to sharing that they value differences in relationships, reflecting on the vital nature of differences in relationships according to feature eight, a couple students indicated that they see commonality as weaving through differences with others while at GBA. They shared that ‘on the surface’ the presenting concerns of the various students are quite different (e.g., drug abuse vs. disordered eating), but that they have come to believe that “fundamentally” their concerns are quite similar. Finding these similarities seems to help students relate to others and be more understanding of their differences. In saying this, students may, in part, suggest that similarities are primary (“fundamental”), yet they seem to maintain a strong valuing of differences. Indeed, their perspective seems to suggest that interaction between differences and similarities that they see in others leads to greater intimacy and closeness.

Grace, for example, describes how in coming to know others more intimately, she has started to see similarities among the differences in others:

That can kind of help you, you know, see the similarities, umm, when you sort of, get down to the deeper issues behind, you know, why someone acts a certain way. Like, for example, like a lot of people respond to, like, sadness or, you know, not feeling loved or not loving themselves, you know, some people, you know, lash out. . . . and then some people are more imploders who might, you know, be more susceptible to depression and isolation and, things like that. And, you know, those sorts of people might present as very different, but, sometimes when you get down to the deeper issues there are more similarities there then you might see on the surface level.

For Grace she seems to experience stronger relatedness in approaching differences with others.

As she has approached and come to better understand others’ differences she has become better



able to relate to these persons. She has come to see symptomatic or behavioral differences as expressions of similar or shared difficulties (e.g., not feeling loved). In other words, she has come to see similar “deeper issues” as underpinning surface differences she has with others. As such, she has found that she can relate to others, even when their external symptoms look very different. In doing so the differences she has with others, no longer seem as bothersome or unrelatable.

Grace also explains that she has a lot more empathy and understanding for people’s differences, as she has come to understand and relate to those who are different from her at GBA: “I have a lot more empathy and understanding now—for people who are really different from me than I might have at one time. . . . I wouldn’t really have understood or related to, you know, different kinds of people as fully.” By saying that she “now” has more empathy and understanding, Grace naturally seems to be contrasting her past approach to differences with how she approaches differences now. She seems to suggest that she perceives others more ‘thickly’ than she has in the past.

Similarly, Abby sees similarities as underlying differences she has with her GBA peers: “[E]ven though people are here for drugs and other things like depression, anxiety, um, it’s, a fundamentally it’s really very similar, it’s just my symptom is different than hers is different than hers is different than hers.” She has come to see commonalities as weaving through the differences she has with her peers. Though the symptoms or treatment issues vary, like Grace, she perceives that the fundamental issues are “very similar.” Abby describes this as being taught to by her by her GBA therapist who she recounts saying:

[Y]our reason for this, because you need to cope with this, is just like someone who smokes a lot of weed. They, they definitely don't have the same issue as you by any means but, they're having the same feelings, they're having the same thoughts.

In saying this, Abby relates how her experience at GBA has promoted this perspective on differences. She interpreted her therapist as describing similar thoughts and feelings as underlying the varying symptoms and problems experienced and displayed by different students.

In sum, some of the students I interviewed seem to describe similarities and underlying differences in students. A relationist may question the primacy suggested by placing similarities in the 'foundational' position, but would likely agree that there is a strong interaction between similarities and differences in human relationships. A relationist would probably argue that this interaction is vital to human relatedness. Indeed, Slife and Wiggins (2009) contend that relationships can be strengthened by both commonalities and uniqueness. Much as the students have described, finding similarities within differences, is in part, what allows for relatedness and connection.

**Of relational differences and conflict.** Several students noted that relationships at GBA are not without conflict or "drama," rather they referred to clear episodes of relational discord. In other words, relationships at GBA are not immune to conflict or problems due to differences they experience in relation to others. Several of the students noted that they now seek to address these differences directly with others, and that this typically has served to enhance their relationships—consistent with feature eights' claim that differences strengthen relationships. One student also notes how they have avoided unnecessary conflict by trying to understand and empathize with where others may be coming from (i.e., seeing others 'thickly').

As a whole, students seemed to relate addressing conflict with their peers quite differently than they had prior to coming to GBA. For example, Samantha describes directly addressing how she felt mistreated by one of her peers. “[O]ne of the girls who graduated from here . . . she used to like to pick on me. . . . I wouldn’t have confronted her before, um, I got here.” Samantha relates confronting this girl that teased her. She further explained that she “just let her know exactly how I was feeling and, like, how I felt that, like, what she was. . . about what she was doing.” Samantha directly, and authentically, shared her feelings with this other student. This frank confrontation of her experience was unlike what she might have done in the past. Indeed, Samantha went on to explain, “I wouldn’t stick up for myself before, so I wouldn’t say anything.” Instead, she would typically allow others to hurt her, without complaint.

Samantha also described how approaching this conflict served to end this peer’s mistreatment of her: “she didn’t pick on me after that.” Aside from ending this apparent mistreatment, Samantha also believes that this confrontation served her relationship with this student. She related that this peer “started talking to me more and, like, she’s been, um, to a couple visits here. And she’ll like, interact with me and like, it’s more comfortable and like, we’ll talk on Facebook when I’m on a home visit.” Samantha experienced their relationship as enhanced because of her willingness to confront this relational concern. Indeed, she even relates their relationship as “more comfortable” and has even maintained a relationship with this peer outside of GBA (i.e., during her visits home). This is consistent with the relational hypothesis that approaching, rather than withdrawing from, differences with others leads to closer relationships.

Samantha described another good example of how she has shifted how she has responded to others when she felt relationally injured.

[O]ne of my really good friends here, she said something to someone that I didn't want her to say. Like, I tried to tell her not to say it, and I got upset with her and I walked away. . . . And then I got upset with myself for how I responded. But then, I came back the next day and apologized and, like, was letting her know. And, like, cleared everything up, so.

Samantha became upset with this friend, who had shared something Samantha didn't want shared. After some time to think about the situation, Samantha described apologizing despite feeling wronged by this friend. Perhaps this served to take responsibility for her reaction in the situation. Regardless, she directly made an effort to resolve this conflict. Samantha contrasts this from how she would have responded in the past, saying she would have not reconciled with the person and remained angry. "I definitely was a grudge-holder before I came here."

Abby describes that she too has found herself upset by some peers at GBA. Specifically, she has been upset at others for "making fun" of her or other students. She then relates how she responded to one particular instance of this teasing. She first noted attempting to resolve this concern directly, after which she discussed this concern with staff: "I was like 'this has gotta stop, like this is not cool', and they sort of ignored me so I talked to [my therapist and] a mentor about it." Abby first addressed her concern directly, telling the offender that it was "not cool" to treat others this way. However, she felt ignored by this student. Only after feeling ignored did she address her concern with staff. This sequence seems important, as Abby first made efforts to address this relational conflict directly. It would have been easy for Abby to simply approach staff with her concern, without attempting to directly reconcile with this peer.

In addition to students describing how they approach differences with their peers more directly; one student, Sophia, shared an example of how she approached differences with a GBA staff member. Indeed, she confronted GBA's clinical director after feeling upset by him.

[F]or a week I just really disliked him cause I thought he was trying to be a dad in my life, and I didn't want it. And telling him to his face, which I wouldn't've done a year ago, but telling him honestly to kind of back off and him being able to open up and tell me that he's not trying anything to make me uncomfortable and he's just walking through a journey with me. And that was the first conflict I've really ever had.

Here, Sophia relates talking to the clinical director directly and honestly about her concerns. She notes this as a clear change from the way she might have approached conflict in the past. While it is not entirely clear what she means by saying that this was the "first conflict she's ever had," perhaps it is an indication that she has withdrawn or avoided conflict in the past, rather than engaging in direct discussion. Indeed, she relates that "a year ago" she would not have acted similarly.

Sophia then related how this experience has benefited her, "[I]t helped me so much to see how I respond in relationships and how closed off and uncomfortable I do get.... [Instead] I talked about it, he explained it to me and we got to work through it. And I don't think that would've happened at home." Sophia does not typically address conflict with others directly as she did in this situation. Rather she described becoming uncomfortable and withdrawing from conflict. Sophia feels like this experience informed how she might address conflict in other relationships. She distinguishes how, in the past, she might have handled a similar situation at home. In fact she continued by relating how "usually at home I would've let it grow in my head and become this huge thing." She thinks she would have let this conflict fester to create a

relational divide between herself and others. Indeed, Sophia's change seems reflective of other student's experiences, as they too have come to address conflict more directly.

Beyond GBA's students learning to address their differences more directly, I also recorded how GBA's lead teacher encouraged her staff to directly address their conflict with one another: "She shared [with me, the researcher] that two teachers came to her with a conflict 'separately' and she encouraged them to talk directly to each other." In her position as lead teacher, she promoted these teachers to address their differences directly. This teacher noted this as an example of encouraging her staff to live relationally, in concert with the expectation for relational living on campus generally.

In addition to directly addressing disagreement with others, Leah described a significant shift in how she interprets differences with others that could lead to conflict. She noted that she used to be apt to fight others who offended her, but now she tries to understand why others bother her.

[I]t's important to like look inside yourself at why it annoys you, like why it bothers you. You know? Like I had this issue with one of the girls here like when she first got here I could not stand her at all. Like I hated her so much. . . . [S]he's the girl that I used to be that I hated so much, you know? That's why like I don't like her. And then once I realized that, it was like so much easier to like her. And like to like understand [her].

Leah's initial comment reflects her taking responsibility for her own perceptions, including why others might bother her. In doing so, she seemed to view this other student as an interpersonal mirror, reflecting her own past struggles. Leah was then able to change her perspective towards this peer, after recognizing why this person had bothered her.

Jill similarly remarked how it has been helpful for her to view others' differences with more compassion and understanding. She notes that prior to GBA she was very rigid in her expectations of others, wanting them to be perfect: "I had, before like unrealistic like ideal standards of what a person should be like, a person always has to be like this this and this, like perfect. And when people didn't...I was really disappointed." In other words, Jill expected others to fit her notions of what they should be, and when they did not she found herself disappointed with others. She went on to explain that at GBA she has come to better forgive and work through differences she has with others:

I mean forgiveness has been a really big thing because, I mean I, I'm a grudge holder, I dunno I like, I hold onto things. Learned that from my dad. But, being here has just really made me be able to let go of like the little things. And the big, the little and big things like, just made me be able to forgive . . . cause its like, you're stuck 24/7 with these girls. So like you can't just like I dunno like, just hate them you know you have to like, work through your, your problems.

Jill almost conveys that the GBA environment demands that she work through her relational problems and differences, thanks to their living together. As such, she has come to value forgiveness in her relationships with others. A relationist would contend, and Jill would likely agree, that this approach to differences with others should create greater closeness in her relationships at GBA.

In addressing interpersonal differences and conflict several students talk about changes in how they address conflict more directly (rather than avoiding or placating others) and in many cases students feel that this has strengthened their relationships with others. For some students, they also noted reconsidering where others may be coming from when they feel bothered by

interpersonal differences. They have come to view these differences in others with increased understanding, compassion, and forgiveness.

**Of one possible exception to feature eight.** While the vast majority of students seemed to describe approaching differences, one student did relate withdrawing from others due to differences. Having noted that she values diversity and uniqueness in others, Jill also notes that there are some traits that bother her and that she “distances” herself from:

Um, I mean with those that, those traits that I guess, kind of, bother me sometimes I just distance myself from them? And I guess just to be understanding about it like, you’re not gonna like everyone in the *world*. . . . I guess more about like, me not liking something in a person because, before I guess I used to take that as like, me not being empathetic enough or kind enough. But now its like if *it bothers me, it bothers me* [said with a laugh] you know there’s nothing can change that. So I just have to work around that.

Jill seems to relate that in the past she would judge herself for not being empathetic or kind enough if she did not like someone. Now she allows these things to bother her. She notes here that there is “nothing” she can do to change this, but rather it is something to be “worked around.” This is a strong absolute statement, though she may be speaking with some hyperbole. Regardless, Jill seems to describe accepting that she will not like everyone. Instead a relationist may emphasize the importance of differences in meaningful relationships and considers how ‘bothersome’ differences may be reinterpreted or addressed in a manner that enhances a given relationship. This contrasts with Jill’s approach to “distance” herself from others who “bother” her. For Jill, it seems there is mixed evidence related to her relational change on this feature, as she also described how GBA has helped her work *through* (not avoid) some interpersonal differences. Of course, some mixed evidence might be expected as students’ progress at GBA.



To be fair, a relationist would not argue that all differences are equally acceptable and approachable in relationships. Indeed, Slife and Wiggins note, “Some types of otherness are, of course, unacceptable (e.g., serial killers), but this is a matter of one’s moral framework” (2009, p. 22). However, a relationist would like raise concern with someone avoiding differences in others that are merely bothersome and would be unlikely to conclude that there is “nothing that can change that” perception.

As a whole, GBA students suggest that differences are quite valued at GBA and these differences seem to enhance students’ relationships. This is consistent with what relationists, Slife and Wiggins (2009), have suggested about the value of differences in relationships. Some students see similarities as weaving through differences in a manner that enhances the relatability of these differences in others and help lend understanding to these differences. Students also described efforts to approach differences they find bothersome in a more direct manner. By approaching these differences more directly students seem to enjoy more authentic and close relations with others in the GBA community.

### **Resulting Grounded Theory**

Each of the themes described in the results of this study contributed to a grounded theory or main finding for this research. Indeed, grounded theorists suggest that this “central category...pull the other categories together to form an explanatory whole” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 146). From a hermeneutic perspective, this grounded theory represents an attempt to consider the larger story that the data represent, as a whole. The following grounded theory is proposed, in broad consideration of the observations and descriptive experiences obtained at GBA.

This study illuminated a story of remarkable virtuous relating within the GBA community. Entering GBA, students felt embraced by the community—received with deep, meaningful caring. They experienced others as relating to them from a more humble and contextually situated perspective. As students came to trust this reception as sincere, they also notice themselves challenging their fears of rejection to join the GBA community in reaching out to others similarly. As a whole, the community evidenced significant relational intimacy as students permitted themselves to love and be loved. The community particularly seemed to recognize this caring to be genuine given the community’s willingness to challenge one another, grapple with disagreement, and approach differences. Students valued this relational honesty and found that these messy relations drew them closer together. This evidenced students’ commitment to serve the best interest of their relationships first and foremost, rather than passively pleasing others. This seemed an especially distinct experience for students.

Students also described living responsible to others and their wider context. They experienced growing relational opportunities and lived dedicated to the expectations required by these opportunities. In other words, they saw themselves as fully engaging and doing the things that students are called upon to do (e.g., taking responsibility for their school work).

Students contrasted their manner of living and relating at GBA against their experiences prior to attending the school. Indeed, their relational engagement and commitment to good relations at GBA seemed foreign in comparison to previous experiences. In other words, students experience themselves, and the GBA community as a whole, as entirely changed. They saw themselves and others engaged in regular acts of kindness, caring, confrontation, and responsibility—unlike what they had come to experience in relationships before. The experiences of one student, Julie, seemed especially helpful in corroborating the change that

GBA's students described. Fairly new to GBA, Julie seemed to typically push others away, fearing their rejection and distrusting their motivations. Julie's experience seemed indicative of how many students described their own past—rejecting of close relationships. The contrast that Julie's example provides seems reflective of the change evidenced by other students at GBA. These students had come to seek and live towards relational closeness and virtuous living, distinct from their previous lived experiences.

### Discussion

The results of this hermeneutically modified grounded theory study shed light on the lived experience of GBA's students. They especially help illuminate the therapeutic impact of students' experiences confirming that these experiences reflect GBA's intentions to engender relational change. The results will be discussed in light of this study's research questions. Finally, the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research will be considered.

### Research Questions

I entered this project with a number of *tentative* research questions—questions that were relevant to the overall interests of my study. By tentative, these questions were assumed to be changeable, especially if students' most salient experiences at GBA better reflected different questions altogether. In general, these questions fit well as a framework for summarizing and discussing the most salient findings herein.

**What change processes were operating for students?** It may first be useful to clarify what is meant by *change processes*. In quantitative psychotherapy research, outcome researchers have become increasingly interested in what gets termed “mechanisms of change.” These are commonly defined as “processes or events that lead to or cause therapeutic change” (Kazdin and Nock, 2003, p. 1117). Indeed, understanding how clients' change is viewed as critical to

informing and guiding clinical interventions. Mechanisms of change are commonly investigated through abstract ‘if-then’ hypothesis testing with standardized measures that are prevalent in quantitative methods. Yet, qualitative researchers have contended that the process of therapeutic change may be better understood in the thick particulars of clients’ experiences, made accessible through qualitative methods (McLeod, 2011; see also “Rationale for Qualitative Methodology” section for additional comparative information regarding qualitative and quantitative methods). Different from a quantitative researcher’s goal to define causal pathways of change, the goal of this qualitative outcome study was to explore the processes of therapeutic change through thick particulars—in light of clients’ descriptions of their experiences and some situated observations of these experiences. In other words, to understand the process of change as situated in students’ lived experience.

In sum, students seemed to describe that they experienced change in and through their manner of relating to others and their larger context. In other words, that change was effected through students’ lived relationships at GBA. This process of change seems wholly consistent with a relational therapist’s goal—to engage change from within the lived experience of clients’ relational context. As such, five of the most salient themes relating to students’ overall change processes will be reviewed.

***Relational caring.*** First, meaningful relational caring seemed to invite and enable change for students. As described in the results of this study, the GBA community met students with deep caring, affection, and concern. Students seem to recall these experiences as particularly salient and as inviting of their change, in an experiential manner. Being met with this relational caring helped students experience themselves and others as more thoroughly relational.

This resembles the oft repeated expression “people don’t care what you know until they know that you care.” Yet even this expression, only partially reflects how students experienced this caring as impacting their change. Indeed, a caring therapeutic relationship has long been accepted as necessary to therapeutic change, yet clinicians commonly view this relationship as a means to an end. The therapeutic relationship is relegated to a secondary role, one that enables a client to be receptive to these more instrumental techniques. Depending on the therapeutic approach, a therapist might see behavioral reinforcement, cognitive reappraisal, or other common therapeutic techniques as the primary conduits of change. Different from this perspective, students did not seem to experience their change as due to a particular therapeutic technique. Rather, students evidenced and described changing from within and because of their lived experience of relationships, inside GBA’s caring relational milieu.

***Ministering.*** Second, students’ change came through their engagement in relational ministering. Students noticed themselves ministering to others and the community at large—being called upon within the community to serve and live relationally. The GBA culture seemed to enable student’s opportunities to look for opportunities to serve others. As a whole, the GBA community seemed to notice opportunities to extend themselves toward one another and to serve in ways that they had not experienced in the past. Relational change seemed to occur in and through these experiences. In other words, student’s change was intrinsically tied to their engaging in relational caring in this manner.

***Messy relations.*** Third, relational change was engendered as students engaged in difficult, challenging relationships. GBA students attributed special value to being challenged by others, working *through* challenging relationships, and generally approaching rather than withdrawing from these difficult relations. Students also developed more genuine relations with

others as they avoided placating others, by instead directly addressing their differences with others in an honest manner. In turn, students more carefully considered the perspectives of others, reconsidering their own perspectives on these differences. These experiences helped student work through their problematic patterns of interacting with others and found that directly reconciling differences led to more intimate relationships.

***Unexpected experiences.*** Fourth, students' change benefitted from the unexpected nature of a number of their experiences. For example, the GBA community and programming seemed to surprise students due to how it operated—with few behavioral constraints. Students also seemed to be touched by the uncommon and unexpected human expressions of caring, relating, and challenging. While taken alone, each of these types of unexpected experiences represented interdependent means of engendering change, the unexpected nature of these experiences was particularly noted and seemed itself impactful on students' change. In other words, it was not treatment as usual or as anticipated at GBA and this alone seemed meaningful to students' change. In this way students were met in a manner that challenged their preconceived notions and prior relational experiences. Students were grateful to be treated differently than expected. Clearly the manner of living at GBA was a stark contrast from students' previous experiences, and students responded with a marked change in their meaningful engagement with others.

***Responsibility.*** Finally, students at GBA benefited by being enabled to act for themselves and thus experience more opportunities to practice relational responsibility. As described in the results section, GBA as a program seemed to operate without a formal behavioral modification system. Rather the program strived to allow students to experience the natural consequences of their actions. It also aimed at giving more opportunities for practicing failure, as they were given

more opportunities to make choices. Indeed, students seemed to take responsibility for their decisions more readily than they had in the past.

In fact, students change seemed quite consistent with how relationists' Richardson et al. (1999) describe choice and freedom:

Choices is a matter of understanding the genuine options that are available, weighing the relative merits of the different possibilities, having the strength of character to see what is best and to act on it, and finally, doing what is best. Freedom and being constrained by duty and context are often one; as the old saying goes, 'The only meaningful freedom is doing what you ought to do because you want to do it.' (p. 136)

Students, more and more, came to actively pursue "genuine options" and the impact these decisions might have. Increasingly, they wanted to do the right thing because it was the right thing to do. They also seemed to see the shared responsibility inherent in their decisions, seeing themselves as holding an intrinsic duty toward their relational context. Students seemed to desire to be responsible, and evidence a more active pursuit of their goals and of meaningful relations.

**Did GBA promote relational change? If so, how is this evident?** Overall, the results of this study supported that GBA students' experienced broad relational change. The lived experiences shared by students and observed on campus demonstrated how they generally experienced and sought meaningful, virtuous relationships. Perhaps most notably, a vibrant community of relational interest was evidenced across the results of this study, in that students seemed to meet each other with exceptional caring and concern. They seemed to prioritize the good of their relationships and the community at large.

Students repeatedly contrasted their relational living at GBA against prior experiences. They contrasted living in the GBA community against both their home-life and previous

treatment programs, since many of the students had lived in a prior treatment program (e.g., another boarding school or wilderness treatment program). Prior to attending GBA, students' relationships were more instrumental and self-serving than virtuous and other-serving. This contrast was demonstrated not only in students' reflections on their past, but in looking across the interviews that I obtained.

One student, for whom GBA was quite new, did not consistently evidence this same relational living. She struggled to meaningfully engage in the GBA community, accept caring from others, and develop virtuous relationships. This was a stark contrast to the other students who were interviewed; each of whom had more experience at GBA and felt deeply connected to the community and were thoroughly engaged in meaningful and virtuous relationships at GBA. As might be expected, students with this wealth of relational experience demonstrated more thorough relational change.

Students seemed to define their GBA experience by the shared, meaningful experience they enjoyed as a community. Their most meaningful areas of progress were more shared than individual. They seem to describe therapeutic progress as interrelated with their relationships within the community, of being met with loving concern and sharing this same loving concern with others. Indeed, it was in relationship to others that students seemed to enjoy their most meaningful and impactful experiences and change at GBA.

Psychotherapists commonly view their clients as carrying their problems 'inside' them, as if the context in which they experience their difficulties is secondary, at best. However at GBA this did not seem the case, students consistently described their experiences and change processes in terms of their relationships to the larger whole at GBA. Students' change was not



self-contained but was described as indivisibly interrelated—always related to one another and best understood in relation to their context.

**How is students' change consistent with the ten features of relationality?** Students' experiences were remarkably consistent with the features of relationality delineated by Slife and Wiggins (2009). As described previously, the data collected in this study were examined in light of six of Slife and Wiggins' ten features. Recall that the remaining four features could not be adequately examined given that these were instructions for therapists. The remaining six features allowed for examination given their particular relevance to areas of change that students could describe and exemplify. Students and the larger GBA community evidenced strong relational change, living in an increasingly relational manner on all six of these features.

In consideration of these features, GBA's students prioritized and lived good relationships, largely seeking the interest of the relationships first, rather than seeking their individual satisfaction. Students sought good relationships despite their acknowledged fear of rejection, allowing for intimacy and closeness notwithstanding their interpersonal anxieties. They also became increasingly patient, understanding, and humble in their perceptions and interactions with others, learning to view others in thick relation to their situated contexts. They evidenced relational responsibility as they were given increased freedoms and opportunities to make decisions within their situated context. Finally, students seemed to revel in the differences of others, and their relationships seemed strengthened by these differences.

There were infrequent exceptions to the overall relational consistency with regards to the six features. However, even these exceptions generally reflected the efforts of students and the larger community to reconcile old habits of living toward a more relational approach. In other words, even these exceptions were often reflective of a move toward relational living at GBA.

**Are GBA's relational interventions countering cultural individualism?** Relational interventions at GBA seemed successful in countering several aspects of individualist living. Student experiences and the larger GBA culture evidenced impressive relational consistency, despite primarily drawing students from individualist cultural backgrounds (i.e., American and Western cultures). While there were occasional vestiges of individualism, among my observations and student interviews, these were clearly the exception and not the rule. In fact, these vestiges were especially evident among students with limited experience at GBA, as might be expected.

Recall that a combination of egoism and hedonism is the individualistic assumption that all people seek to maximize pleasure and self-interest while avoiding pain or suffering—that the primary human drive is to maximize self-benefit (Slife, 2004b). As discussed previously, a wide cultural tide has helped purvey this assumption, significantly impacting American culture and living (Bellah et al., 1985; Richardson et al., 1999). Still, GBA students evidence a significant shift toward more altruistic, rather than hedonistic living. Students seem to regularly seek relationships for the sake of relationship, and not for the sake of meeting self-satisfying, instrumental intentions.

Students found themselves caring about their peers and the larger community without instrumental intentions, that is hoping to get something in return. Instead, they described (and I observed) numerous accounts of caring for the sake of caring, and serving for the sake of serving. Students clearly saw themselves as acting for the sake of others in the community, without seeking reciprocation or remuneration. Indeed, the GBA community as a whole seemed to demonstrate quite altruistic relations.

Like egoism, reductionism is readily evident in and serves to further individualize American culture today. Recall that a particular type of reductionism suggests that some complex phenomenon is really just an instance or manifestation of a simpler phenomenon, and thus may oversimplify the rich context of human experience (Griffin, 2000; Slife, 1993). Here again, GBA students seemed to evidence clear movement towards perceiving and living in a manner that valued the contextual depth and thickness of others. In fact, the GBA experience seemed characterized by thick relations, students were thickly situated within a community that perceived one another from a wide stance—in consideration of historical, cultural, and situational factors. This created a community of caring, as staff and students no longer reduced one another to stereotypes or similar reductions. They viewed each other with an eye of understanding and compassion, even when others seemed to offend or bother them.

Students were consistently engaged in community living at GBA. They engaged, as a whole, in community living, including various shared activities that emphasized the interpersonal context. Students were frequently involved in formal community activities such as daily groups, relational council, drumming—in addition to informal activities like playing cards together. The few occasions I witnessed a student alone, she was quickly approached by others out of concern or with an invitation to join the group as a whole. Indeed, students' experiences seemed thickly situated within GBA's caring and engaged community.

The individualistic assumption of value-freedom reduces values to self-contained individually held tenets or beliefs, rather than shared beliefs, ethics, or morals (such as community or family values). From this perspective a person should not impose his or her values on others. In contrast, relationists' claim that values are inescapable and play an intrinsic role in human relations (Christopher, 2001; Slife et al., 2003). Indeed, values are not self-contained, but

part of our relational context. As such, values arguably help us organize our experience and relate within the world in meaningful ways.

The GBA community demonstrated a clear value-laden stance, with shared values guiding the program. Students described GBA's values (such as respect, caring, and responsibility) as taught explicitly and purposely. Yet, they did not describe resentment toward values as imposed or unwelcomed. Rather, they came to see themselves as a meaningful voice within the community in establishing and maintaining GBAs shared values. Students were engaged in the discussion and implementation of these values, as they served in leadership roles, even helping to guide their peers through GBA's value-laden programming. Perhaps more importantly, students saw themselves as developing value-laden living in relation to their peers at GBA. They evidenced this value-laden, relational living as they sought the interest of the community as a whole. Students anticipated that their change, in coming to live with concern for others, would follow them outside of GBA when they completed treatment.

### **Limitations**

While yielding some meaningful and promising findings related to rationality, this study has limitations. First this study's limited generalizability will be reviewed, followed by a consideration of the researchers expectancies and biases.

**Generalization.** Generalization in this grounded hermeneutic study differs from traditional conceptions of generalization found in positivist accounts of science. Traditionally, generalization is concerned with ensuring that a sample is representative of a larger population. Positivists consider research participants to be self-contained and independent. Samples, then, are a group of these independent participants. To justify generalization, quantitative researchers

often seek to enlarge their sample size, ensure randomization, and diversify the demographics of their sample to match the larger population.

In contrast, generalization from a hermeneutic perspective is understood in considering the relationship between parts and whole. Hermeneutic researchers maintain a holistic perspective wherein parts are always reflective of the larger whole. Conversely, the whole is also reflective of its parts. Given this, the results of this particular study (parts) are necessarily interrelated within and reflective of the larger whole. Participants are not considered independent variables, as is the case in positivist methods, but as having an embedded relationship within a larger social context. Thus, the meanings derived from my study have relevance to both GBA's students and their larger culture.

Indeed, qualitative research permits this type of generalization of knowledge, even from a relatively small sample of participants. The rich, contextualized detail of a qualitative investigation utilizing a few participants yields an in-depth understanding of phenomena. In contrast, positivists' researchers seek breadth by enlarging their samples, yet this often results in a de-contextualized and abstracted understanding of a phenomenon. This qualitative investigation yielded detailed descriptions of a number of students' experiences, seeking to understand their relational change in rich context. This in-depth understanding of these students' experiences, in turn, is not assumed to be independent and detached, but part of a much larger whole. A better understanding of this particular part allows for better understanding of the cultural and situational context of which they belong.

Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggest that generalizability of a grounded theory is strongly tied to the particulars of the context from which the data been derived:

[A] grounded theory specifies the conditions under which a phenomenon has been discovered in this particular data. A range of the situations to which it applies or has reference is thereby specified. . . . [Future readers] must discover the extent to which the theory does apply and where it has to be qualified for the new situations. (p. 15)

Kvale (1996) similarly suggests that unlike quantitative research, the responsibility of determining whether the results of a study generalize does not rest solely on the researcher. Future readers also hold responsibility in assessing how well the findings might apply to other circumstances. In this case, relationality was introduced in an impressively thoroughgoing manner, as GBA attempted to infuse relational interventions and living across nearly all aspects of student life at this girls' boarding school. While this study suggests that relational interventions hold promise to affect relational change, it would be problematic to assume that weekly outpatient therapy sessions might have the same marked impact on clients lived experience.

**Expectancies.** Researcher expectancies were of careful consideration for this study, as the researcher values and practices relational ontology and therapeutics. This may impact the project problematically if the researcher is simply *fishing* for confirmation. In other words, the findings of the study may reflect more the experimenter's expectations than an integral look at the change processes occurring at GBA, if careful checks were not established. As discussed previously, awareness of my own biases was a first step to checking for fishing and bias, however, this was not considered sufficient in maintaining the integrity of the research.

As the researcher, I also entered this project with an expressed openness to data that violated my expectations and biases. In fact, data analysis specifically searched for such contradictions (e.g., exceptions). Several of these exceptions were described throughout the

results of this study. There were some particularly notable exceptions to my preconceptions and assumptions entering this project. For example, I was surprised by how some of Slife and Wiggins' (2009) ten features of relationality were of stronger practical relevance than others. Particularly relevant was feature two (relationships should be good rather than satisfying) that seemed reflected again and again throughout my data, while some features were generally deemed irrelevant and were only minimally reflected. I did not expect such vast differences in the ten features' applicability. Another violation of my expectations was reflected in my direct experience within the relational community at GBA. While I proposed to interact freely and openly as a researcher, I did not anticipate discovering the relational questions I was investigating to be so strongly reflected in my own felt relationships while on campus. A third exemplar of my preconceptions being ruptured related to the students' manner of relational subgrouping. I had anticipated that if GBA were genuinely relational there might not be any such subgrouping, in that they might resist typical teenage cliques. However, I did not consider the possibility that peer subgroups may be relationally altered to become more flexible, open, and caring of other subgroups. These examples represent only a few of the several violations I experienced in relation to my assumptions and preconceptions, while gathering and analyzing my research data. In sum, these violations helped ensure that my understanding of students' relational change was grounded in their genuine lived experience, not simply the lived experiences I anticipated.

Other professional colleagues were consulted for dialoguing about my interpretations, analyses, and results. One of these peers read and occasionally noted each separate transcript, alongside this researcher's basic notations (open noting), while specifically attending to any clear biases or contradictory interpretations. This colleague's overall impressions and summaries of

the meanings of each interview were consistent with this researcher's conclusions. While adding some unique insights to my analysis, he rarely interpreted the text in a manner inconsistent with my interpretations. We openly discussed and reconciled these infrequent, minor differences. Indeed, this and other consultations yielded new ways of viewing the data, expanded possible meanings, helped discover additional contradictions of the researchers assumptions, and provided alternative conceptualizations. These colleagues also affirm that given the data, the researcher's findings were appropriate.

### **Future Research**

While GBA's students' evidence significant relational change, this change was uniquely situated within their lives while at GBA. Ongoing change, as students transitioned from GBA into other contexts, was not explored. In other words, there was no attempt to explore their lived experiences following their time at GBA. Additional research might look at "what's next" for GBA's students, including how their relational change translates into relational living outside of the GBA community. One would not expect their experiences at GBA to be self-contained, in that their relational change is not reflective of the larger whole of their life. Rather, a relationist would hypothesize that their experience here is likely reflective of things to come. Future research might consider additional interviews of students post graduation, in considering how relationality may reflect itself in students' ongoing lived experience.

Recall that relationality is receiving growing attention and interest, with increasing conceptual development and application across various philosophers, professionals, and psychotherapists. The growing practice of relational psychotherapy crosses various types or forms of intervention. Here, relationality was implemented quite thoroughly into the daily programing and therapeutics of a boarding school. In other settings, relational interventions may



be introduced in outpatient therapy settings (e.g., individual, couple, family, or even group therapy sessions). Investigation of the impact of relational interventions in these settings would seem critical.

Beyond the situated findings of this research, this study evidenced the value of qualitative research in therapy outcome research, generally. As reviewed, there is a general paucity of qualitative research in the field of psychotherapy. Yet psychotherapy is a meaning-laden, relational experience that is perhaps best accessed through the lived-experiences of its participants. The rich information gathered in this study underscores the value of qualitative methods in enriching therapeutic process and outcome research more broadly. Future qualitative researchers may consider the particular benefits of interviewing clients who are early in treatment in conjunction with those with more experience, as this yielded a very helpful contrast in this particular study.

While this study lends support to the value of qualitative research in investigating therapeutic process and outcome, various research methods have unique strengths to offer in exposing data relevant to the impact of therapeutic treatment. Additional research on relational therapy at GBA, and elsewhere, should consider the contributions of various approaches. Case studies, quantitative studies, and mixed methods designs are a few examples of approaches that may offer additional insight concerning the impact of relation interventions. The use of these various research designs is seen here as potentially complementary, rather than contradictory, in further exposing the total experiences of clients who receive relational interventions.

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## Appendix: Interview Outline

General Category (and related research question)	Sample/Starter Questions	Relevance in regard to 3 assumptions of individualism vs. relationality		Interviewer Notes
			Potential relevance in regard to 10 features	
<b>Experience of their own change</b> (What experiential change processes are operating for the students at GBA?)	Do you see yourself as different now than before coming to Greenbrier? ( <i>If needed: How?</i> ) Can you share examples that might compare your life before to your life now that illustrate this change?	Various	Various	
	You may have come to Greenbrier with some particular problems or issues, has your experience here helped you with these concerns? ( <i>If needed: How?</i> )	Various	Various	
<b>Greenbrier's contribution to this change</b> (Is the students' experience at Greenbrier effectively promoting relational change?)	Can you tell me about your experience here, at Greenbrier? Perhaps you have had some [good/negative] experiences here. Can you tell me about some of these?	Various	Various	
	What or who has helped make a difference for you here? ( <i>If needed: How?</i> )	Various	Various	
	Would you share about one or two of the most meaningful experiences you have had here?	Reductionism/ Contextualism	10. Temporality & practical engagement	
<b>Relational- specific change</b> (If so, how are the students' experiencing themselves as thinking, acting, and pursuing more virtuous relations?)	How would you describe your connection within the Greenbrier Community? Is this connection any different from your connections before coming here?	Reductionism/ Contextualism	1. Primacy of relations 2. Virtuous relations; 3. Fear of rejection; 4. Thick context	
	Are there ways that you contribute to the community here, at Greenbrier? Can you think of an example of this? If I asked other members of the community how you contribute or have helped them, what do you think they might say?	Hedonism/Altruism	2. Virtuous relations	

<p>Do you see yourself as interacting with other people differently now than before coming to Greenbrier? (<i>If needed: How?</i>)</p> <p>Can you share examples that illustrate this?</p>	Hedonism/Altruism; Value-freedom/ Value-laden	2. Virtuous relations	_____
<p>What do you consider when you try to understand another person and their point of view?</p> <p>Has this approach changed for you?</p>		4. Thick context; 7. Abstractions are secondary	_____
<p>Has the quality of your relationship with anyone in particular changed? (<i>If needed: How?</i>)</p> <p>Can you share any experiences with that person that demonstrate this?</p>	Hedonism/Altruism; Value-freedom/ Value-laden	2. Virtuous relations	_____
<p>Perhaps you have had some problems with other people here or before coming to Greenbrier. Could you tell me about these problems?</p> <p>Who do you feel is responsible for the problems in this situation?</p> <p>Looking back, are there possibilities that perhaps you didn't recognize at the time?</p>		5. Relational agency	_____
<p>How do you approach differences between yourself and others?</p> <p>For example?</p> <p>Has this approach changed from before? For example?</p>	Value-freedom/ Value-laden	8. Value differences; 9. Humble conceptions	_____
<p>When you think about your past, how do you feel like it impacts you now?</p>		10. Temporality & practical engagement; 6. Here-and-now	_____