Youths’ Perspectives on Their Relational Identity Development through Residential Treatment

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We are deeply grateful to the youth who participated in this study for their willingness to share their journey with us.

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The goal of this study was to examine youths’ narratives of their identity development during a residential, wilderness, and family therapy program. A semi-structured interview was conducted, and thematic analysis was used. Youth described their identity in terms of who they learned to be in their relationships, which included being authentic, vulnerable, accepting of themselves and others, empathetic, and honest. They discussed a number of program elements that influenced their identity development, all of which involved relationships with staff, therapists, and other students. Results of this study have implications for staff training, program development, and program evaluation.

Keywords: residential treatment, wilderness therapy, family therapy, adolescent development, identity, relationships
In the present study, we examined youths’ narratives of their identity development during an intensive residential, wilderness, and family therapy program for youth with addiction and mental health challenges. Emerging research has documented a reciprocal relationship between identity issues and mental health problems in adolescence (Wiley & Berman 2013). Specifically, externalizing problem behaviors and lack of a coherent sense of identity may reinforce each other (Crocetti, Klimstra, Hale, Koot, & Meeus, 2013). Although most adolescents move through a process toward identity maturation during adolescence (Becht et al., 2016), about 14% of youth experience significant identity issues (Berman, Weems, & Petkus, 2009). When identity development is not well established by the end of adolescence, youth may struggle in future developmental periods. For example, female college students with clinically significant identity distress showed significantly more externalizing symptoms and antisocial behaviors, and males experienced significantly more internalizing symptoms such as anxiety, depression, peer problems, and social withdrawal (Hernandez, Montgomery, & Kurtines, 2006). Thus, it is essential to understand identity development in youth experiencing mental health problems.

Marcia created the identity status model based on Erik Erikson’s work (Erikson, 1959). Marcia (1967) documented four identity statuses, which are defined by where someone falls along the two orthogonal dimensions of exploration and commitment. These four statuses include: achievement (high exploration, followed by commitment), moratorium (high exploration and low commitment), foreclosure (low exploration and high commitment), and diffusion (low commitment and low exploration). Those who have reached achievement status have experienced a period of identity crisis and have been able to resolve this crisis and commit to a stable sense of identity (e.g., cultural, political, religious, occupational, personality, values, life goals, etc.). The moratorium status refers to individuals who are actively exploring their identity, values, and life goals and attempting to settle into a stable sense of identity. Individuals in the foreclosure status have not experienced an identity crisis but instead hold firm and often parentally determined commitments related to their identity. Those in the identity diffusion status have not committed to a stable identity and are not engaging in active exploration of the different identities available to them (Marcia, 1967).

Over the course of adolescence and young adulthood, commitment processes tend to increase in a linear fashion (Luyckx, Klimstra, Duriez, Van Petegem, & Beyers, 2013). Individuals who have made commitments in the
achieved and foreclosed identity groups report higher levels of psychological well-being, adjustment, and emotional stability (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Wiley & Berman, 2013). On the other hand, individuals stuck in the exploration process may experience anxiety, depression, and distress (Luyckx & Robitschek, 2014; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009).

Identity Development in a Relational Context

Recent longitudinal studies have revealed how proximal and distal social contexts shape and are shaped by youth identity development (Crocetti, Beyers, & Çok, 2016). A number of studies have demonstrated how identity development is embedded within family and community relationships (Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Crocetti, Garckija, Gabrielaviciute, Vosylis, & Zukauskiene, 2014; Schwartz, Mason, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2008, 2009). For example, Schwartz and colleagues found that changes in adolescent-reported family functioning significantly relate to changes in identity confusion (Schwartz et al., 2009). Further, Crocetti and colleagues reported that identity is promoted by warm and supportive parent-child relationships (Crocetti et al., 2014). In terms of the community context, adolescents with different identity styles have been shown to differ in terms of their civic engagement (i.e., involvement in volunteering activities and in youth nonpolitical organizations; Crocetti et al., 2014).

An emergent body of literature has identified the essential role of family relationships in facilitating identity formation (Arseth, Kroger, & Martinussen, 2009; Crocetti, Branje, Rubini, Koot, & Meeus, 2017; Meeus, Ledema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005; Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002). In particular, identity development has been found to be positively associated with warm and nurturing parent-child relationships (Arseth et al., 2009; Crocetti et al., 2017). On the other hand, youth who perceive their parents as psychologically controlling tend to explore a breadth of identity alternatives and experience greater difficulty committing to meaningful life domains (Luyckx, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Berzonsky, 2007). Emerging evidence suggests that there is a reciprocal relationship between difficulties with identity development and adolescent-parent relationships; it may be that family relationships affect identity, and identity has significant effects on family relationships (Crocetti et al., 2017). In this study by Crocetti and colleagues, identity certainty was related to nurturing family relationships, and, in turn, adolescents’ identity commitment led to a more supportive relationship with their mothers and a more egalitarian relationship with
their siblings (Crocetti et al., 2017).

Early research on psychosocial maturity in adolescence revealed that mature young women used interpersonal relationships for identity resolution (Josselson, Greenberger, & McConochie, 1977). That is, they used friendships to explore and clarify their identities in relation to others, referred to as self-differentiating experiences (Grotevant, Thorbecke, & Meyer, 1982). Josselson and colleagues concluded that mature individuals are "identity seekers, attempting to discover who they are and who they want to be in relation to the significant others in their lives" (Josselson, Greenberger, & McConochie, 1977). Further, it has been suggested that ego development arises through social interactions that challenge individuals and require them to think deeply about the relation between self and others (Loevinger, 1976; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2013). More research is needed to fully understand how identity develops in the context of relationships.

An Intervention for Youth Who Struggle with Addiction and Mental Health Problems

Pine River Institute (PRI) is a 36-bed residential program for youth struggling with addiction and mental health challenges. Located in Ontario, Canada, PRI combines four services: wilderness therapy, residential treatment, parent intervention, and aftercare. There are five stages of the program: Stage 1 is the wilderness phase, Stages 2 - 4 take place on the residential site, and Stage 5 involves the provision of aftercare services while youth transition back to their homes and communities.

The wilderness therapy component occurs during the first two months of the program, where youth live in a wilderness environment, camp in tents or yurts, and engage in physical activities such as hiking and canoeing. Personal growth is facilitated through group initiatives, individual therapy, journaling, and other therapeutic activities. After youth graduate from the wilderness, they spend the next eight to ten months at the residential campus completing high school credits, living collectively, and participating in individual, group, and family therapy. An important aspect of the program is the requirement of parent involvement. Parents meet individually with staff and in groups to learn how to respond to their adolescents in developmentally appropriate ways. Furthermore, youth and parents engage in family therapy. In the final phase of the program, youth are re-integrated into the community with the support of aftercare services.
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PRI’s program is partly based on the maturity model, which posits that youth struggle with mental health challenges and addiction due to immaturity (defined as blocked emotional/social development; McKinnon, 2008). A blockage of social-emotional development obviously has the potential to affect the core adolescent task of identity development. Similar to other youth treatment programs, PRI’s program is designed to accelerate development through treatment and raise youths’ developmental capacities to levels normative for their same-age peers (Pepler, 2016). This makes it an ideal setting to study the impact of treatment on the processes of identity development in adolescence. Numerous types of programs exist to support youth struggling with mental health challenges. There is, however, very little research on how treatment programs support adolescents in the core task of identity development. There are also few studies examining youths’ identity development from their own perspectives.

The goal of this study was to understand youths’ perspectives on their identity development and how this development was accelerated through treatment. In this qualitative study, we interviewed adolescents struggling with mental health challenges and addiction about their experience in a treatment program. The qualitative approach enabled us to derive an in-depth understanding of youths’ process of identity development in their own words and to answer two main research questions: (1) What are youths’ perspectives on their identity development? (2) What aspects of the program support this development?

**Method**

This study was conducted at Pine River Institute (PRI) with ethics approval from the York University Ethics Review Board. Parents were informed about the research project and provided written consent for youth to participate. Parental consent was obtained for 24 youth (71%). Only youth with parental consent participated in this study and the youth themselves assented to participate. Youth were informed that if they declined to participate in the study, it would not jeopardize their relationships with staff nor the services they received at PRI. Conversely, if they chose to participate, every effort would be made to de-identify their responses. They were cautioned that it was possible that individuals who knew them well might recognize quotations as belonging to them.
Participants

Youth were informed about the study by the PRI principal and were invited to speak with the first author if they wanted more information about the study and/or were interested in participating. It was decided a priori that the sample would be 10 youth, as this is a manageable sample size when conducting in-depth interviews and doing qualitative analyses. The total sample consisted of seven boys and three girls. Youth were chosen for the interviews to represent the gender ratio at PRI, which ranges from 66% to 85% male (Pine River Institute, 2014). During daily activities, six male youths mentioned that they were interested in being interviewed. All six of these youths were interviewed. For the remaining four participants, four girls were selected from diverse stages in the program. Of the youth invited to participate, one female youth declined, and a male youth who was interested in the study was chosen instead. Youth were also chosen from different stages of the program: two participants were from Stage 2, four from Stage 3 and four from Stage 4. No youth were from Stages 1 or 5 as they were not present in the center. Similar to the population at PRI (Pine River Institute, 2015), all 10 youth who participated in this study were white and their average age was 17.5 years old, with an age range between 14 and 18 years old. Half of the participants were from the Greater Toronto Area and the others were from within the province of Ontario. More than half of youth admitted to PRI have been diagnosed with a significant mental health challenge, the most common being anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Similarly, many of the youth in this sample struggled with a range of mental health challenges in addition to addiction, including: self-harm, school refusal, family conflict, and past trauma. Information on socioeconomic status (SES)/income is not formally collected by the program, however, clinicians have reported that most youth tend to be from mid to high SES families. At the time of interview, the youth in this study had been in the program for an average of 8.5 months, whereas youth spend an average of 11 months in the program in total (Pine River Institute, 2015).

Procedure

The first step in developing this study was to meet with the clinical staff to discuss the project and receive feedback on the research goals and procedures. The research questions and methods were mutually decided upon with the clinical staff. The primary researcher spent a few days a week at PRI for about eight months, participating in daily activities with the youth and staff. This extended
time at PRI was essential in developing trusting relationships with the youth and staff, as well as getting a deeper understanding of the program. Since the goal of this study was to capture the perspectives of youth in their own words, open-ended interviews were conducted with the youth.

Analyses

The semi-structured interview guide contained 15 main questions, which are included in Table 1. These questions were intentionally broad to give youth the opportunity to discuss the aspects of themselves and their experiences that they considered most important. Subsequent follow up questions were asked, such as asking youth to provide more information about something they have shared. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, with the majority of interviews lasting 60 minutes. Thematic analysis was chosen to analyze the transcripts. Thematic analysis is a flexible and accessible approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In short, and like other qualitative methods, thematic analysis is a way of parsing qualitative data into themes that are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive. The decision to use a descriptive approach as opposed to a more interpretive approach was made before beginning the analysis. In the analysis phase, the primary researcher worked on bracketing assumptions from previous reading, research, and personal experiences to allow the themes to emerge from the data. Care was taken to stick closely to the language of the participants when creating categories and to limit the amount of interpretation.

In the first phase of the analysis, transcripts of the 10 interviews were coded using NVivo software with the initial main categories and subcategories identified. NVivo is a software used to organize data. It allows the researcher to manually highlight sections of text and code it with the name of a theme that the researcher creates. All parts of the text that have been given the same theme name can then be viewed in one section to allow the researcher to then assess the theme for internal consistency.

In the second phase, all 10 interviews were re-coded to identify any additional examples of existing categories, as well as to identify new categories. In the third stage of analysis, each category was examined to ensure it was internally consistent (i.e., the properties within the category were conceptually similar), as well as to ensure the category was conceptually distinct from other categories. All categories that contained properties from only one or two
participants were excluded in the final model. The final step was sorting all categories into domains, and the main categories and subcategories that fall under those domains. A consensus was reached amongst researchers on the structure of domains, categories, and subcategories.

Table 1. Main Questions from Interview Guide

1. Think of yourself before you came to Pine River. How would you have described yourself? How would your parents have described you?
2. Now think of who you are at this moment, how would you describe yourself? What has changed?
3. What challenges led you to participate in this program?
4. Since you’ve been at Pine River, have you noticed any changes? What part(s) of the program was (were) most helpful in making these changes?
5. Think of a time you felt you could be yourself around someone else. Who was this person? Who else do you feel like you can be yourself around?
6. Think back to the circle of trust activity you completed at the beginning of the program. What did your circle of trust look like then? What does your circle of trust look like now?
7. Has your relationship with your parents changed since coming to Pine River? If so, how has it changed? What aspects of the program helped you and your parents make these changes?
8. Think back to when you wrote your letter of accountability to your parents. Describe the experience of writing the letter in as much detail as you can remember. Did this letter impact your relationship with your parents?
9. Describe your relationships with your friends before you came to Pine River. Have these friendships changed at all in the time you’ve been at Pine River?
10. Describe your romantic relationships before you came to Pine River. Have these relationships changed at all in the time you’ve been at Pine River?
11. Please describe your relationships with the staff at Pine River.
12. Please describe your relationships with your team members.
13. Please describe what it’s like to participate in the weekly process groups.
14. How would you summarize your experience in this program overall?
15. What do you think the future holds for you? What are your plans after you finish at Pine River?
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Results

Relational Identity

The first aim of this study was to determine youths’ perspectives on their identity development. From the interviews, the domain Relational Identity emerged, which is represented in Figure 1. In this domain, youth described the interaction between their identity development and their relationships with staff and other youth at PRI. They explained that who they are becoming (e.g., empathetic, accountable, funny, grateful, etc.) developed in the context of their relationships during treatment. Youth also articulated that to build these close relationships, they needed to show their true selves to others (e.g., being authentic, being vulnerable, accepting themselves, being honest). For example, one youth discussed how their ability to provide support to others (a relational pattern) is a core aspect of their identity:

I went through patches here where I didn't do too well in process groups… I was dealing with my own stuff and I just shut down, and that's not a good me…when I'm at my best is when I'm offering support to people.

Figure 1. Aspects of youths’ identity development.
Another core aspect of their identity development involved positive relationships acting as a mirror through which youth can begin to see and develop positive aspects of themselves. For example, following feedback on a youth’s hope and wisdom in the face of adversity, they replied, “People tell me a lot of the time that I'm a wise person and it makes me feel really good because back home, I wasn't seen that way. I was just seen as crazy and angry.” In these ways, the process of identity development was represented by youth as occurring within the context of close, healthy relationships with both peers and staff at PRI. Youths’ descriptions of “who they are” related to their ways of being in relationships as opposed to static individual characteristics, such as being ‘smart.’ The eight categories within this domain are described below.

**Being authentic and real.** The theme of authenticity came up across multiple questions during the interviews. One youth said, “I've worked a bit on identifying who I am… when I came I didn't really know who I was, because I'd been like browsing around, looking for someone's personality to try on. Like a new pair of pants.” Another youth explained that through feedback with people at PRI they were able to construct an authentic sense of self. They said, “Especially with your masks and walls you put up. You don't even realize those are walls until someone calls you on it and they're like 'You're putting up a front right now, that doesn't feel authentic.’” The culture of authenticity at PRI allows for healthy experimentation with different ways of being, as youth receive feedback from people they trust about how any their attitudes and behaviors are experienced by others.

**Being vulnerable.** The second aspect of relational identity development is the importance of being vulnerable in relationships, which involves showing true parts of oneself to others and having others see and validate these parts. One youth explained how some of their behaviors before PRI were the result of being afraid to show their true selves in relationships. They said, “Yeah, so a lot of it came down to vulnerability. Immaturity saved me from having to be vulnerable.” Another youth commented, “To be in an empathetic relationship you need to learn how to be vulnerable.” Similar to other participants, this youth drew a connection between having the courage to be truly oneself in a relationship (vulnerability) and to be seen and accept attuned care within a healthy (empathetic) relationship.

**Acceptance of self and others.** Participants mentioned that cultivating acceptance for themselves and other people was important in their developmental process. One youth explained that a large part of their therapeutic work was,
“analyzing my behavior and accepting what I don't really like about myself or my behavior.” Accepting themselves allowed youth to be authentic and vulnerable with others, which facilitated building close relationships. Acceptance of self was also related to youth’s capacity to be accepting of others, which was another relational pattern that became part of their developing sense of self. Furthermore, feeling accepted by others was a core part of the context at PRI that made identity development possible.

**Developing empathy.** Many youth mentioned that the capacity to be empathic was a core relational pattern they had developed throughout the program, and this in turn became a way that they self-identified (i.e., as an empathic person), as well as a quality that they would look for in future relationships. One youth said of their peers at PRI, “We all can relate a lot…we learn how to really feel empathy for people and care about people.”

**Honesty.** Another prominent change noted by youth was their ability to be more honest in relationships. While the theme of authenticity captures youth’s sense of being able to be themselves in their relationships, the theme of honesty relates to youth’s ability to be tell the truth even when it is difficult. One youth explained, “I've become more close and more honest with my dad and my family…It's the feeling that I actually feel that good in our relationship, that it feels authentic and honest. And the ability to be vulnerable with him.” Another youth explained how being honest was connected with their sense of self-confidence. This youth gave advice to others to, “Stand up for what you believe in, be respectful, be honest and direct.” Similar to the other categories in this domain, being more honest is a way of being in relationships that became part of youths’ identity.

**Taking accountability.** Youth mentioned the importance of taking responsibility for their behavior, which in the PRI program is referred to as “taking accountability.” One youth described this as “admitting things you've done, coming to terms with things you did, understanding why you did the things you did, and most importantly wanting to change.” The youth discussed this way of relating to people as helping them have mutually satisfying relationships, as well as being an essential aspect of how they viewed themselves.

**Gratitude.** Participants commented on the importance of being grateful for things in their lives, as well as expressing gratitude towards others. For example, one youth said, “You just gotta appreciate where you're at and what you get here…so you just got to appreciate things.” Becoming someone who expresses
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gratitude informs youths’ developing sense of self and impacts the quality of their relationships.

**Humor.** Youth described using humor as a way to connect with others and be authentic in relationships. One youth explained, “You gotta laugh… sometimes you even have to laugh at yourself. Saying that was stupid, what I did, but whatever.” In this way, participants have identified humor as a way to learn, grow, and make mistakes without harming their self-esteem. They also identified humor as a way to be gentle with themselves and others.

**Elements that Facilitate Identity Development**

The second aim of this study was to understand what aspects of the program youth view as responsible for their development. These themes are captured in the domain Program Elements Linked to Change, part of which is represented in Figure 2. Youth discussed the key aspects of the program that they considered highly influential in their identity development. The seven categories in this domain included: the process group, the opportunity to practice skills, the process of giving and accepting feedback, check-ins, Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1987), being accepted within a community, as well as opening up to and connecting with others.
Figure 2. Aspects of the program that youth discussed as responsible for their identity development.

**Process group.** All youth mentioned process group as being a main space in which they worked on their relationships with other students in the program. Process group involves a team of students (about 10 youth in total) and a staff or therapist meeting three times per week to discuss how things are within the team. This includes: discussing problems, sharing how each member is doing, giving feedback to others about their behavior, asking for support, and offering appreciation to fellow team members. One youth shared their experience in process group by saying:

I enjoyed process group because people are honest and it’s a safe place…they can trust you and you can trust them. It feels good to be in a relationship with that many people …makes everybody feel really open and honest.

Another youth described process group as “a really good place to grow, and to hear support from everyone.”

**Practising skills.** A second influential part of the program involved learning relationship skills in therapy, then applying these skills in relationships with staff and other youth. Youth also discussed learning interpersonal skills at PRI that they could then apply with family, friends, and others outside of PRI. One youth explained, “I also learned how to deal with interpersonal situations. Relationships I developed with team members and staff have been a practice for situations that I may come across later on.”

**Giving and accepting feedback.** Youth discussed the importance of giving and accepting feedback about one’s behavior as a mechanism that facilitated their identity development. Often, this process of giving and accepting feedback occurs during process group; it may also occur during therapy sessions, or informal conversations with staff or other students. One student explained giving and receiving feedback in process group, “Everyone has taken at least one or two pieces of feedback and probably given some to other people… and it has been given in such a way so it's productive and it helps people deal with their issues.” Many youths described how the process of giving and receiving feedback helps people grow and become more authentic in relationships.
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**Check-ins.** At PRI a check-in refers to an informal conversation between a youth and a staff member or two youth in which the youth opens up about how they are doing. One youth described a check-in as, “just talking about how your day is, or what you're feeling or what you've been doing in therapy, or anything.” Participants talked about how important check-ins were in their process of change, as they function to both help the individual youth in their development and facilitate a deeper relationship among the individuals involved in the check-in.

**Dialectical Behavior Therapy.** Youth discussed Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1987) as a way to gain skills that helped them be themselves in relationships. One youth stated that “DBT teaches you a lot. It teaches you how to be mindful, and how to be aware of certain issues you have.” After learning these skills in DBT, youth were able to practice skills like mindfulness and interpersonal effectiveness in their relationships with the staff and students at PRI, as well as with their families who were also learning new skills in therapy.

**Being accepted within a community.** Youth mentioned that being part of a whole community of staff and students working to be their true selves in relationships was the reason PRI was so effective at facilitating their identity development. One youth explained, “I think the biggest thing here is because it’s a community…it's like a sort of society where you can just learn to be yourself.” When asked directly what helped them in their personal growth, one participant responded, “I think the community, like being in a culture that’s extremely accepting.”

**Opening up to and connecting with others.** Youth described how the process of opening up to others and having their vulnerability met with care and trust was essential in their developmental process. One youth described their relationships with team members by saying, “I’ve opened up to so much. And it’s really helped and, yeah, I just have the deepest relationships with everybody here.” When asked what parts of the program had been most helpful in their journey, one youth answered, “The main thing is making connections with people. Umm, being around people who I can relate with and talk to. I think most of my work has been figuring out how to connect with people, you know?”

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to enhance understanding of how a key aspect of adolescent development, identity, is accelerated through a residential program
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for adolescents struggling with addiction and mental health challenges. PRI’s programming is based on the maturity model, which recognizes that adolescent addiction results in stalled emotional and social development (McKinnon, 2008). In the present study, youth were receiving treatment for their addiction and mental health challenges. Participants described the process of opening up to themselves and others during treatment, which allowed them to take the risks and opportunities necessary to advance their identity development. They noted a number of specific program elements that supported this process, all of which were related to their relationships with staff and other students in the program.

In their interviews, youth highlighted the central role of relationships in promoting their development. They explained how their identity development and their experiences in relationships were interconnected. For example, they shared the importance of being authentic in relationships as a way of both developing a sense of who they are and connecting with others. They mentioned the importance of being able to be vulnerable with others, empathetic, honest, accountable, and grateful, as these were all part of who they wanted to be in the context of their relationships. In this way, their identity development represents the ongoing process of constructing a sense of self through connections with others. This way of understanding identity development, as fundamentally relational, is consistent with ecological perspectives on development, which emphasize the primary role of relationships in adolescent development (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Relational identity development also relates to Harter’s focus on the developmental and sociocultural contexts through which the self is constructed (Harter, 1999, 2006, 2012). In examining the self-worth of adolescents, Harter and colleagues found a four-factor solution with negligible cross-loadings, suggesting different contributions to self-worth stemming from relationships with parents, teachers, male classmates, and female classmates (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998). They discovered that perceived support or validation for oneself as a person from those in each relational context predicted self-worth in that context. This work, along with the results of the current study, suggest that it may not be adequate to study identity development without considering relational contexts, as was done in early work on identity development (e.g., Marcia, 1967).

Youth in this study mentioned seven program elements that facilitated their identity development: process group, practicing skills, giving and accepting feedback, check-ins, DBT, being accepted within a community, and opening up to and connecting with others. During process group, youth share their emotions with their team, make requests for support, and learn how to handle conflict.
constructively by working through problems with staff support. They also learn how to give both positive and negative feedback, such as telling someone how their behavior is affecting them. Youth learn how to respond to such feedback from others and begin to integrate these skills into their relationships outside of process group. Abraham and colleagues examined adolescents’ perceptions of both process group and specialty group therapy and discovered that adolescents rated on-going process groups as more helpful for relating to staff and peers, and specialty groups were considered to be more helpful for cognitive, social, and interpersonal skill development (Abraham, Lovegrove-Lepisto, & Schultz, 1995).

All seven of the program elements identified by youth as important in their identity development involve relationships with other students and staff in the program. This finding is consistent with surveys of youth placed in residential care who cite relationships with staff as one of the most helpful and positive aspects of their residential experience (Anglin, 2004; Devine, 2004; Gallagher & Green, 2012; Smith, McKay, & Chakrabarti, 2004; Zimmerman, Abraham, Reddy, & Furr, 2000). The relationship components of residential treatment, whether formalized or informal, have been identified by youth clients and staff as the most helpful dimensions, with planned and/or spontaneous social interactions between staff and clients being perceived as highly valuable and important (Zimmerman et al., 2000).

Limitations

Given the highly personal nature of this research, it was important to allow youth to self-select into this study. This led to a potential sampling bias, as participants may have over-represented youth who had a positive attitude toward and who had benefitted from the program. To get a more complete picture of youths’ development of self in relationships, it would be useful to interview parents and others with whom the youth have a close relationship. Given the results of the current study, it is important to explore how youth’s sense of self develops in different relational contexts. Moreover, the present study had a small sample size and contained youth from one treatment program. As such, findings from this sample of youth at PRI may not generalize to other programs. It is essential to conduct similar research with other samples in other programs and in other geographic regions. It is also important to follow up on this research with a larger sample size and a mixed-methods approach. Finally, the current study was cross-sectional. Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether these
changes are sustained and to measure the underlying processes in the development of self. These limitations present important avenues for future research.

**Implications for Prevention and Intervention**

Several implications for prevention and intervention can be drawn from youths’ perspectives of their relational identity development. This study highlights the value of using a developmental lens when studying programs to support youth who struggle with mental health challenges and addiction. An important function of interventions for struggling youth is to accelerate development in key areas, such as identity development. It is, therefore, essential to tailor interventions to enable youth to accomplish these tasks and to measure changes in identity development at various stages of the treatment process.

Youth discussed how their sense of self was relationally defined and constructed. These findings highlight the importance of training staff who work with adolescents to be attuned to the nature of youths’ developmental tasks and challenges, as well as to the quality of their relationships with youth. To ensure youth are able to develop authentically within their relationships, it is essential for staff to create a positive peer culture and teach youth how to support each other’s journey of change. Future research is needed to examine how specific experiences in relationships within different programs relate to the diverse range of outcomes youth achieve during these programs designed to guide them onto healthy pathways.
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Footnotes

1 In this manuscript, the gender of the speaker is intentionally not included to protect confidentiality at the request of the program, and the terms ‘they’, ‘them’ or ‘themselves’ have been adopted for this reason.

2 The term “Process Group” is explained in detail in the next section on *Elements that Facilitate Identity Development*. 