IMPACTS OF THE STATE 4-H COUNCIL EXPERIENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Deidre Suzanne, the love of my life, and to Ellery Grace who is the life of my love. Through your love, faith, support and sacrifice you both became my collaborators in this work and helped make this achievement possible.

Always and Forever.

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SECTION ONE:

DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Introduction

Leadership has long been recognized as a subject central to the human experience. Prepared leaders can wield critical influence in the rise of cultures, the growth of human opportunity, and the lasting direction of world events. Studies of leadership inform the earliest writings of Aristotle, the history of warfare, the early success of the American space program, the impact of Nelson Mandela, and countless other examples of forces that have shaped our world today. It is logical to expect that the study of leadership will also inform the world of tomorrow, as young people mature to assume roles that guide the mechanisms of social change and cultural advancement. This study focuses on the impact of leadership experience, through engagement with a large-scale program designed to foster its effectiveness and success. The program is focused on the experience of adolescents and rooted at the University of Missouri, one of 69 *Land Grant Universities*, established by the Morrill Act of 1862 to expand access to higher education. Once established, the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 expanded the Land Grant University mission to include the *Cooperative Extension Service,* which will henceforth be referred to as *Extension,* an outreach component of Land Grant University programming which sent agents into rural areas to connect end users with the products of their university's agricultural science research. When they encountered target audiences who were unreceptive to their innovations, some of these agents found success in shifting their outreach focus from adults to youth, who were often more open to new approaches (www.4-h.org/about/4-h-history).

One particularly effective strategy involved organizing competitive events, such as yield contests, between adults using traditional methods and the youth using the

research-based techniques and practices. This cross-generational competition strategy proved successful in introducing agriculture technology to many communities, as adults who lost decisively to their children in these competitions frequently became more receptive to the research-based methods advocated by the extension agents (http://www.4-h.org/about/4-h-history; http://4h.missouri.edu/about4h/who.htm). Over time, the youth outreach portion of this strategy became known as *4-H,* with the "H's" representing *head, hands, heart,* and *health.* 4-H was adopted as a core program of the Cooperation Extension Service by 1924. Today, each Land Grant University continues to have a Cooperative Extension service, referred to as simply "Extension," with 4-H as its youth development component.

One unique feature of this setting is that the University of Missouri is both a Land Grant University and a member of the American Association of Universities (AAU). While Extension is central to the mission of a Land Grant University, per the Smith-Lever Act, it is not a component of AAU membership (https://www.aau.edu/who-we-are/membership-policy). Through personal communications with a variety of faculty members at the University of Missouri, I learned that some perceive a tension between the university's Land Grant University mission and AAU membership, as resources are devoted to Extension that might otherwise be directed in support of securing grant dollars, conducting research, funding faculty fellowships, and other AAU priorities. However, I embrace the other view, which holds that the Land Grant University mission as a resource that enriches both the nature and value of any research conducted through the connections with children and adults that Extension offers. Many members of the AAU administration are understood to embrace this viewpoint (S. Reno, personal

communication, April 19, 2019), and there is a movement within the AAU leadership to consider adding *engagement* to the AAU membership indicators in recognition of the value that entities such as Extension can bring (M. Stewart, personal communication, April 13, 2019).

Unlike the other components of university-based extension programs, 4-H is actually a hybrid organization, with a presence at both the state and federal levels. It is part of a federal chain of command separate from the state's Land Grant University (see figure 1), and an organization into itself. For that reason, 4-H will be referred to in this dissertation as both an organization and a program, operating in each state at the federal, state, and local levels.

The focus of 4-H at the national level has expanded over time, beyond practical training in science and technology to the inclusion of developmental programing in the areas of citizenship, healthy living, and a wider range of workforce preparation topics. From their Land Grant University settings, 4-H programs are extended to communities across each state through partnerships at the community, county, and state levels. In communities, adult volunteers manage 4-H clubs, which offer projects for children ages 5-18. These projects may involve a wide range of subject areas, such as photography, specific breeds of livestock, geospatial science, horticulture, cake decorating, and archery. Subject area offerings depend on the expertise of these adult volunteers, who work with project participants over a period of time to develop skills and knowledge.

At the county level, Land Grant University faculty at each county university extension office manage these 4-H clubs, train and manage volunteers, and conduct programming within the county. Finally, at the state level 4-H is administered by Land

Grant University faculty members who conduct statewide youth development programming and provide subject matter expertise, in support of their colleagues managing 4-H at the county level. In 2017, Missouri 4-H reached 16,608 youth ages 5-18, who participated in one of its 804 active 4-H clubs, 147,318 youth through special-interest programs, and 28,784 youth through school enrichment programs (extensiondata.missouri.edu).

One traditional component of a state 4-H program is the establishment of what I refer to here as a *state 4-H council.* Among different states, these councils are sometimes referred to by other names, such as the State Teen Council (Kentucky and New Hampshire), State 4-H Leadership Team (Louisiana), State 4-H Youth Leadership Team (Illinois), and the State 4-H Cabinet (Virginia) (personal communications, June 30 – January 25, 2016). Despite these differences, state 4-H council members are commonly viewed as ambassadors of the program to outside organizations, representatives of the voice of youth within their organization, and role models to other 4-H youth at the county and regional levels. Examples of state 4-H council activities may include assisting faculty at regional 4-H events in leadership roles, teaching workshops at events for younger children, representing the voice of youth on university and community adult councils, and being a conduit for communication between 4-H youth and adult staff on specific issues. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term *state 4-H council* will be capitalized when referring to the council of Missouri 4-H and not capitalized when referring to the councils of other states or to state 4-H councils in general. As suggested in the introduction, the phenomenon under study is the lasting impacts of service on Missouri's State 4-H Council. The focus is specifically on the state 4-H program of

University of Missouri Extension, which will heretofore be referred to as *Missouri 4-H* and *MU Extension,* respectively.

While practitioner-based research offers long-established insights into 4-H programming as a whole (Hamilton, 2014), we still know little about the effects of the State 4-H Council experience specifically. The state 4-H council model provides an established venue to further explore leadership development components of the 4-H program, offering widespread embeddedness within the multi-state organizational structure and historical roots that date back over a century. This study explored the impact of serving on a state 4-H council, an opportunity to experience higher level of leadership, on leadership development. This is important because of the critical influence prepared leaders can have on the rise of cultures, the growth of human opportunity, and the lasting direction of world events. In this work, I define *higher levels of leadership* as increased levels of: (a) responsibility for decision-making, (b) opportunity to make decisions, and (c) scope of the ramifications of their decisions.

The State 4-H Council model is an experiential youth development opportunity that is in line with the Missouri 4-H *mission* to engage youth as "valued, contributing members of their communities in partnership with caring adults" (4h.missouri.edu). It is intended to produce youth outcomes consistent with the Missouri 4-H *vision* to create an environment in which "youth and adults learn, grow and work together for positive change" (4h.missouri.edu). This study adds understanding to the impacts that can accrue from service on a state 4-H council and help inform the development of these councils in state 4-H programs beyond Missouri's borders. In doing so, this study will reveal elements of Missouri's State 4-H Council model that could be adapted by other avenues

of leadership development, identifying factors that promote and detract from success and providing greater insight into the leadership experience.

Statement of the Problem

Despite being the oldest and largest youth development organization in the United States, there is a lack of research regarding 4-H in general and the "state 4-H council experience" in particular. While this gap appears to be problematic for the scholarly literature for academic audiences, Hamilton (2014) notes that practitioner research on 4-H in general has been conducted for quite some time. Indeed, a searchable database at Pennsylvania State University contains 4-H research dating back to the 1911, with content ranging from journal articles to unpublished graduate studies (Scholl & Munyua, 2004). Hamilton (2014) offers an explanation for this scarcity of scholarly 4-H research, noting that published 4-H research studies are generally found in journals geared towards practitioners, such as the *Journal of Extension,* and asserting that these works have not entered the scholarly literature because articles from practitioner journals are rarely cited in journals geared towards researchers.

With a limited body of scholarly literature on 4-H, it follows that there is an even larger gap regarding youth whose 4-H experience includes service on a state 4-H council (Bruce, 2003; Leech, 2007). A search of the Pennsylvania State University database, the ERIC and JSTOR databases, Google Scholar, and the University of Missouri Libraries system using the keywords "State 4-H Council," "Council," "Team," "4-H Leadership," and "4-H Leadership Levels," revealed only seven studies that examined this experience specifically. Three (Boleman, Merten & Hall, 2008; Bruce, 2003; Bruce, Boyd, & Dooley, 2004/2005) were journal articles, two (Bruce, 2003; Leech, 2007) were

dissertations, and all but one originated from a single state 4-H program. Backwards reference searching and electronic forward citation searching led to research articles pertaining to aspects of 4-H (i.e., leadership and communication skills), but did not reveal additional articles that were specific to the state 4-H council experience.. This study addresses this gap in the literature by exploring the lasting impacts of service on a state 4-H council leveraging positive youth development theory. The broad reach of the 4-H organization contributes to the significance of this problem. The connection with the land grant infrastructure has resulted in 4-H faculty based in 3,007 counties nationwide, working through 110 Land Grant Universities that reach over 6,000,000 young people each year (www.4-h.org), with state 4-H councils having a presence in almost every state.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore how participating in the State 4-H Council in Missouri impacted its members in four: *social embeddedness, leadership empowerment,* and *thriving*. These areas are interrelated and grounded in concepts central to the theoretical framework I selected. The first area, social embeddedness, was originally formulated by sociologist Mark Granovetter (1985) to describe the relationship between individual actions and social relations in a context of economic behavior. Granovetter (1985) maintained that individual actions are heavily influenced by the normative assumptions they share with other individuals – and networks of such individuals – with whom they closely interact (Granovetter, 1985; Little, 2012). Further, Granovetter (1985) asserted that these social relations influence purposive action through generation of trust and "discouragement of malfeasance," which he defines as "distrust, opportunism, and disorder" (p. 491). For the purposes of this study, social embeddedness

refers to the social aspects of an individual's role on the State 4-H Council, which include expected standards of behavior, shared goals, the building of teamwork, self-regulation, and understanding of self in relation to the larger group through the building of strong positive relationships.

The second area, leadership empowerment, refers to the development of individual strengths and capacities that facilitate positive and mutually influential adolescent relationships with the families, friends, groups, schools, and communities that comprise the *contexts* in which they live (Lerner, 2004; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). These contexts may include family, school, work, teams, 4-H club, and peers, as well as the larger contexts of neighborhoods and communities (Youngblade & Theokas, 2006). Examples of the strengths and capacities being developed may include the opportunity to contribute to one's community, build experience in consequential decision-making, participate in youth-adult partnerships, develop public speaking skills and build the perception of oneself as a leader, through purposeful action and interactive processes between the youth and their contexts (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2012).

Finally, the third area is thriving, which is the growth of attributes that allow a young person to flourish (Arnold, 2018). I will examine the construct of thriving in this dissertation through two primary theoretical constructs: *individual-context relationships* and *sparks*. With regards to the first construct, Ramey and Rose-Krasnor (2012) assert that individual-context relationships are central to the process of thriving. Benson and Scales (2009) and Lerner et al. (2011) further suggest that these relationships regulate the very course of an adolescent's development, and are *adaptive* when both the adolescent

and their context benefit from the relationship. The issues of how and whether social embeddedness lends itself to adaptive individual-context relationships is one avenue of inquiry in this study.

The second thriving construct involves the concepts of sparks, which Scales, Benson, and Roehlkepartain (2011) define as "a passion for a self-identified interest, skill, or capacity that metaphorically lights a fire in an adolescent's life, providing energy, joy, purpose, and direction" (p. 264). I use the term "spark" to identify this construct because I have observed that it is the one most frequently used in the literature regarding this concept, both current and emerging. However, DesRoches and Willoughby (2014) use the term "valued activities" and note that this concept is referred to in the literature by other terms as well, such as "passions" (e.g., Vallerand et al., 2003) and "self-defining activities" (Coatsworth, Palen, Sharp, & Ferrer-Wreder, 2006).

Supportive relationships and opportunities for empowerment provide a context for youth to develop and identify their sparks (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). Further, current and emerging research suggests that youth engagement in these spark activities is a predictor of *positive adjustment*, which includes a larger sense of purpose in life, more optimism, and higher self-esteem over time (DesRoches & Willoughby, 2013; Froh et al., 2010). Thriving occurs over time as youth identify their sparks and take action to pursue them, with these efforts supported and nurtured through their relationship with those in their surrounding contexts (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011).

Research Design

This study took a qualitative approach, which offered several advantages in assessing individual interactions, perceptions of needs, and human experience. Specifically, the qualitative approach allowed me to account for systems of relationships and capture large amounts of data, including those not anticipated or previously known (Becker, 1996). As Creswell (2012) notes, qualitative research allows for recognition of the unique role of context and offers the ability to manage complexity among interdependent contexts and processes. State 4-H councils offer high contextual conditions, and one example of this includes the bonds formed within each year's state 4-H council members as they establish a group culture of their own. These experiences and connections may exert profound and rich influences (Granovetter, 1985) on council members that would likely not be captured by a quantitative methodological approach.

This study was interpretive in nature and employed a phenomenological approach to explore the impact of experiencing service in the unique role as a State 4-H Council member. Phenomenology is particularly well suited for exploring and interpreting unique individual experiences, as I will describe below, and it allows the researcher to do so through a lens of *reflection* (Rossman & Rallis, 2016), which is also a key component of the experiential learning model central to all 4-H programming. Phenomenology generally relies on individual descriptions, obtained in interviews with one interviewer and one respondent, to capture the 'essence' of that person's experience in a way that is not contaminated by other perspectives (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009).

However, as Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, and Irvine (2009) note, there are two main approaches to phenomenology: (1) phenomenology as developed in the early 1900s

by Edmund Husserl, founder of the phenomenological movement, and (2) *hermeneutic* phenomenology as developed around the 1930s by Martin Heidegger, a protégé and critic of Husserl, and further developed around the 1950s by Hans-Georg Gadamer who was influenced by both. According to Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook and Irvine (2009), Heidegger's interpretation of phenomenology emphasized interpretive *understanding* over mere description in the quest to examine the human experience, which he argued could only be accomplished through the interpreter's own lived experience. Key to hermeneutic phenomenology are the concepts of *historicality,* the background and culture which shapes how a person grows to understand the world, and *pre-understanding,* the cultural meanings and organization that predates our understanding and become part of our historicality (Laverty, 2003). Essentially, hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that human understanding is influenced significantly by an individual's background, experiences, and culture of origin. Rather than a Husserlian attempt to bracket my perceptions in order to 'arrive at the truth,' this hermeneutical phenomenological inquiry is appropriately "an attempt to achieve a richer understanding of the phenomenon under study (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009, p. 668) by analyzing themes from written interpretations of lived experience (Sloan & Bowe, 2013) that are generated through interviews with State 4-H Council alumni.

This distinction between Husserlian and hermeneutic phenomenology is important because the phenomenon under study is the lasting impacts of service on Missouri's State 4-H Council and I approached this study as a research practitioner, an *insider* through my role as the coordinator of Missouri's State 4-H Council. Hermeneutic phenomenologists incorporate their understandings into the data derived from participants (Koch, 1999) and

many view the concept of bracketing during data collection as arguably problematic (Laverty, 2003). My extensive and prolonged engagement with the subjects over a period has afforded me cultural familiarity, understanding of the contexts around which data is being gathered, and a level of established communication through positive and familiar relationships with the individuals I interviewed. Hermeneutic phenomenology provided a means to guide this inquiry, construct data collection processes and interpret gathered data, leveraging the benefits of my experience in a manner appropriate to the uniqueness of the experience I studied.

Phenomenological research requires the researcher to engage in critical *self*-reflection (Rossman & Rallis, 2016), which was core to my own professional process in this role. Still, as Anderson (1999) notes, the validity of practitioner research is often viewed with skepticism by portions of an academic community wary of the "personal stake and substantial emotional investment" (p. 13) of the practitioner in their own projects. Professional ethics issues may limit the researcher's ability to disclose information or raise difficult power issues that must be considered (Creswell, 2012). Conversely, a research practitioner might be inclined (consciously or not) to falsify data, interpret the data in a biased manner, use the data to gain political leverage, or be unaware of their own changing perceptions of reality as new insights are revealed (Anderson, 1999). With this in mind I worked to address these caveats, in ways that are explained below.

The culture of Missouri's State 4-H Council is one of a youth-adult partnership, in which youth are valued as full partners in the planning and decision-making processes. As Council Coordinator, my role is to ensure that the group decisions stay within

guidelines such as university policy and appropriate safety practices. Within those parameters, youth are empowered to think independently, encouraged to disagree if they have alternative ideas, create their own approaches to their work, and make decisions as a group. Thus, the power dilemmas Creswell (2012) describes are diminished in this case. However, having served in this role for 12 years I must acknowledge the validity of Anderson's (1999) caveat on the researcher's inclination to interpret data in a biased manner. To account for my biases, I engaged in practices which compel the phenomenological researcher to further clarify their interviews and settings (Groenewald, 2004), including reflective memos and written field notes.

Although the caveats are well documented, it should be noted that practitioner research offers several strengths as well. Those pertaining to this study include organizational knowledge, insights regarding processes and positional relationships, access to people and information, familiarity with culture and context, and established relationships for rapport and communication. Ultimately, as Drake and Heath (2010) note, the advantages and disadvantages of practitioner research are highly circumstantial, "depending on the particular circumstances and purposes of the research" (p. 31).

As Lester (1999) notes, "phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives…" (p. 1). I found through this experience that the strengths of practitioner research informed my inquiry and improved my ability to capture the essence of these highly contextual individual experiences. I believe these strengths aligned well within a Heideggerian phenomenological framework, which seeks not only to describe but to understand the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

In the last two decades, strengths-based approaches to the study of adolescence have emerged in the literature, which have collectively formed the basis of *positive youth development* (PYD) theory. In contrast to the paradigm that dominated the study of adolescence for the last 5 decades, PYD theory frames adolescence as a period rich with inherent strengths rather than a time of developmental deficits and undesirable behaviors (Damon, 2004; Geldof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2012; Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2013; Rennekamp, 2014; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). PYD theory inherently assumes that youth have the ability to become positive and contributing members of society (Arnett, 2006; Durlak et al., 2007; Halverson, 2010; Lerner, 2005) and the potential for very positive and productive developmental trajectories that will continue across their lifespan "when they develop in the context of communities rich in assets aligned with their strengths" (Lerner, 2005, p. 19).

In practice, the PYD theoretical framework provides wide range of utility for youth development practitioners. Lerner et al. (2013) note that PYD is often used to describe a developmental process, a philosophical approach to youth programming, and a general descriptor for the work of youth development programs and organizations (Lerner et al., 2013). For the purposes of this study, I am constructing a theoretical framework based on three key components comprised of elements that weave throughout contemporary PYD theory: (1) Lerner's (2005) *Five Cs*, (2) the concept of adolescent *thriving*, and (3) the concept of positive bidirectional relationships between individual and context.

First, Lerner's (2005) influential *Study of Positive Youth Development* contributed to the literature on PYD with a focus on the concepts of *competence, confidence, connection, character,* and *caring* that wove throughout PYD research (Lerner et al., 2005). Lerner (2005) theorized that young people who are instilled with these "Five Cs" will be on a developmental path that demonstrates a *sixth* "C" of *contribution* (to self, family, community, and the institutions of a civil society). PYD perspectives embrace the concept that all young individuals have the potential for very positive and productive developmental *trajectories,* which are not fixed and can be significantly influenced by the bidirectional relationships between the adolescent and their contexts in ways that will continue across their lifespan (Lerner et al., 2013). Lerner (2005) suggests that youth with high levels of all six Cs are on a positive youth development trajectory, while those whose lives contain lower amounts are at higher risk for a developmental path that include the kinds of personal, social, and behavioral problems exemplified by the deficit approach above.

The second component of the theoretical framework for this study focuses on adolescent thriving. Thriving is the development of attributes (such as the 5 Cs above) that reflect a flourishing, healthy young person who actively contributes to enrich one's self, family, community and society as a whole (Lerner et. al., 2009). In contemporary PYD research, thriving is often studied in conjunction with the concept of sparks, as described above. Positive youth development programs engage youth in activities aligned with their sparks. These activities are described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as *flow activities,* which are self-chosen, engaging, pleasurable, intrinsically motivated, focused on the present, and leave the participant feeling energized afterward (Froh et al.,

2010). The identification, accumulation, and nurturing of sparks over time contribute to thriving, with these opportunities most often realized through significant relationships (Scales, Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2010). Research into the types of youth program activities associated with these relationships reveal additional variables important to the process of thriving. These include *intrinsic motivation*, *quantity of time*, *level of engagement,* and whether there is a significant *level of challenge* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Larson, 2000).

Lastly, the third component in the theoretical framework for this study involves individual-context relationships. Contemporary youth development research has increasingly moved beyond a focus on individual variables alone and focused greater attention on the relationship between youth and the multiple levels of their contexts (Ramey & Krasnor, 2012; Youngblade & Theokas, 2006). In essence, the literature suggests that thriving youth have a mutually-beneficial bidirectional relationship with the contexts in which they live, with each having a positive impact on the other that facilitates mutual growth (Scales, Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2010). Indeed, the work of researchers in fields ranging from developmental systems psychology and contextual psychology to psychopathology reflect an acceptance that these dynamic, bidirectional interactions between youth and their ecology are highly important in understanding both adolescent behavior and the nature of their trajectories (Youngblade & Theokas, 2006).

Unlike quantitative research, which may be used to generalize to a population, qualitative research endeavors to generalize to theory (Lee & Baskerville, 2003; Trauth, 2011; Yin, 1994). Therefore, I am providing a common thread that is central to 4-H programming in every state, despite differences in 4-H programming contexts which may

vary significantly from one state to the next (as will be discussed later). The ability to generalize to a theory that is core to 4-H programming across varying contexts will directly impact the applicability of this study beyond Missouri's borders.

The result is a theoretical underpinning that is highly applicable for practitioners and particularly versatile. Lerner (2013) alludes to this versatility by noting that PYD theory has been used as a theoretical framework, descriptive vehicle, and organizational philosophy of youth development programming in general and 4-H in particular (Lerner et al., 2013). While it is rooted in developmental systems theory, PYD theory has developed greatly in the last decade through Lerner's (2005) *Study of Positive Youth Development* commissioned by the National 4-H organization. The alignment of this theoretical framework with the 4-H organization provides the potential for broad, practical implications for 4-H professionals beyond Missouri's borders in this examination of the state 4-H council experience.

Research Questions

Resting within the framework of positive youth development theory, this study focused specifically on the impacts of State 4-H Council service in relation to the three areas: social embeddedness, leadership empowerment, and thriving. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1) *How did membership on the State 4-H Council influence individual actions during the time of service?* This research question lends itself to social embeddedness, and is intended to establish whether those in this study were heavily influenced in their actions by their fellow Council members and their role on the Council itself. Granovetter (1985) maintained that the normative

assumptions they share with other individuals are highly influential and influence purposive action – that is, actions that are useful but not designed or planned. The data from this research question has the potential to be foundational to the succeeding questions, offering insights into self-perceptions and abilities resulting from this shared experience.

2) *How did State 4-H Council membership impact individual member's views of themselves?* This research questions addresses the second area, leadership empowerment, and is intended to establish whether self-perceptions of those in the study changed in relation to themselves as a leader. As mentioned above, this includes such things as the experience and ability to contribute to their community, make consequential decisions, create partnerships, and build communications skills.

3) *In what ways did State 4-H Council experience affect individual member's abilities to make an impact in the contexts where they live now?* This research question addresses the third area, thriving, and specifically explores whether participants Council experience contributed to their actual abilities to achieve adaptive individual-context relationships, which are important in the course of their development (Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner, 2011).

4) *How did State 4-H Council experience impact individual member's abilities to pursue their greatest dreams and interests?* Also geared towards the third area of thriving, this research question also addresses the issue of whether the relationships and opportunities participants acquired through their Council experience affected their ability to identify and pursue their sparks. As

mentioned previously, youth engagement in these spark activities is a predictor of positive adjustment, which includes a larger sense of purpose in life, more optimism, and higher self-esteem over time (DesRoches & Willoughby, 2013; Froh et al., 2010).

Research Methods

Participants

The aim in participant selection was to select participants who have lived this experience and are willing to discuss it, but who are still diverse enough to provide rich and unique perspectives that can increase understanding (Laverty, 2003). This study used a purposive sampling techniques to recruit alumni of Missouri's State 4-H Council. Purposive sampling is appropriate in the study of highly contextual conditions and cultural norms, as it maximizes a researcher's ability to identify emerging themes with a wide range of gathered data (Bruce, 2003). The sample for this study were identified from personal knowledge, existing relationships, and official records of State 4-H Council membership.

Inclusion criteria were established for the purposes of obtaining a homogeneous sample to better understand the meaning of an experience to this particular group (Crist & Tanner, 2003). I limited the inclusion criteria to those who served from 2010 to 2013 in order to achieve greater homogeneity, for five primary reasons: First, it was important to select youth who served on the Council during my tenure as coordinator, as the contextual conditions and cultural norms of these councils are substantially different from those led by my predecessors. Key factors influencing these contexts include differences in leadership styles, historical traditions, and organizational priorities.

Secondly, the individuals in this group have largely shared a high uniformity of Council experience and are likely to share a significant uniformity of post-Council life experience as well. Twenty nine (69%) of these individuals served in Executive Committee roles, and 23 to 25 years of age is a stage of life at which milestones such as the completion of a Bachelor's degree, marriage, and/or having children are not uncommon. The third reason is pragmatic, recognizing the advantages provided by my existing relationships with potential respondents, facilitated through social media linkages, creating what is essentially a convenience sample.

Fourth, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out, my prolonged engagement and persistent attention over time offered a potential for a meaningful scope and depth to a study of this topic that might otherwise be unattainable. The trustworthiness of the data in a study is tied directly to that of the researcher who collects and analyzes it (Patton, 1999), and my experience with State 4-H Council added value in the process of understanding. Finally, this sampling technique resulted in a sample which was born in-or-after 1995, increasing potential applicability to future research by aligning with emerging research on a possible "Generation Z," currently in the embryonic stages.

It should be noted that a lack of both ethnic and gender diversity was to be expected in this sample. Of the 41 possible subjects, 14 (34%) are male and 27 (66%) are female. Additionally, two individuals of African American descent (representing 5% of the total possible sample) comprise the only non-White Council members within this age range. However, this lack of diversity is fairly representative of the overall population of Council members during my tenure as Council Coordinator. Of the 157 State 4-H Council members who served from 2007 to 2017, only 11 (7%) individuals (10 African

Americans and one Latina) have been non-White. Ninety four (60%) members who have served from 2007 to 2017 were female and 63 (40%) were male. Given that the potential sample of those who served from 2010 to 2013 contains 6% fewer males and almost 2% fewer African Americans total population who have served during my tenure, I attempted to compensate by oversampling African American and male subjects.

Due to the highly contextual conditions of this study, the sample was recruited through a purposive sampling technique. This involved identifying State 4-H Council alumni who fit the parameters described above and inviting them to participate through personal outreach. As a function of my established connections and relationships with the target population, this outreach took place via phone, email, social media, and face-to-face conversations.

Data Collection

Once members of the sample were identified and recruited, data collection methods consisted of a preparation phase followed by individual interviews, totaling 15 in all. The preparation phase included a review of records and artifacts that pertain to the contextual relationship between the State 4-H Council and the interviewee, which included digital correspondence and items such as photos and awards. This review was coupled with a process of self-reflection to identify the biases and assumptions that I as the researcher brought, enlisting them as valuable assets to the interpretive process (Laverty, 2003). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative data analysis recognizes the role of reflection in increasing the researcher's understandings, as they move back and forth between the larger context and individual elements over time (Sloan & Bowe, 2013).

Although I did not attempt to bracket my assumptions, as would a Husserlian phenomenological researcher, it was important to remain self-aware of the role that my biases and assumptions could play (Crist & Tanner, 2003), both in my propensity to interpret data a certain way and to understand a deeper context to some of the information received from the interviews. According to Sloan and Bowe (2013), Gadamer and van Manen assert that language is revealing within historical and cultural contexts that are understood by both participant and researcher. My understanding of the individual research participants, the structure and processes of the State 4-H Council, and the overall organization of MU Extension lends itself to this common language and may be reasonably viewed as strengths to the objectives of this study in increasing my understanding of Council members experiences.

These observations were recorded in a reflective journal and were ongoing as I (a) considered the ways in which my position and experience with the State 4-H Council affected how I received and interpreted the data being collected; (b) critiqued my own interview techniques; and (c) re-evaluated whether my approach is uncovering opinion or experience (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Laverty, 2003; Sloan & Bowe, 2013). In addition to the reflective journal, I created field notes during the interview process. These notes included my observations of participant data that would not be captured in an audio interview but nevertheless conveyed meaning regarding the experience of the interviewees. These data included physical posture, facial expressions, vocal intonations, silences and the absences of speaking, variation in eye contact, and gestures that were useful in understanding their experience more fully (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Laverty, 2003).

The interviews were digitally recorded, using smartphone technology in nine cases and Zoom video teleconferencing in five. Transcription took place through a combination of automated and manual methods, using the Temi web-based transcription tool and then reviewing the transcriptions with the recording to manually correct mistakes. Examples of common transcription errors included *forage* instead of *4-H, state for each counsel* instead of *State 4-H Council,* and *original rap* instead of *regional rep.* Although I used a guiding list of specific interview questions to aid participants in describing their experiences, I recognized that hermeneutic phenomenological interviews are typically co-creative experiences (Laverty, 2003) and proceeded accordingly. For example, due to our existing relationship, follow up discussion was often initiated by the interviewee rather than being guided by a set of pre-determined interview questions, which served to ensure that the process of understanding was not hindered by my prescriptive frame as the interviewer. It was imperative that my interview questions be framed to elicit data centered around each participant's experience, rather than untethered personal opinion, and equally important for me to have follow-up questions prepared for related issues that arose during the course of the interview. As I analyze the data I employed a Max van Manen approach to the *hermeneutic circle* (van Manen, 2007), outlined below, as developed by Heidegger and further refined by Gadamer (Sloan & Bowe, 2013).

The hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle provides a lens for understanding shared experience, by dynamically examining both smaller and larger units of meaning. Unlike weights and measurements, in which the whole is simply the sum of the parts, the comprehension of language and meaning requires constant reexamination of

both the components and the larger whole. In the case of language, the meaning of a story is greater than that of an individual sentence, just as the meaning of a sentence is more than a summation of the individual words. Outside the context of that larger story, individual sentences offer incomplete information and individual words have little meaning. The reader constantly revisits the individual words and sentences as they read, revising the reader's interpretations of them as the reader's awareness of the larger story develops. In phenomenological terms, through the context of the larger units of meaning the researcher continually revises their interpretations of the smaller elements of meaning based on their ongoing interpretations. These revisions lead to continually new and improved interpretations of the context. The process of moving back and forth between elements and context may often be unconscious in the course of an individual's daily life, and my familiarity with the State 4-H Council contexts will aid me as in this process as a researcher.

Data analysis. This hermeneutic circle process aligns with *open coding, abstraction,* and *axial coding* techniques, which comprise the primary mode of standard inductive qualitative analyses (David, 2006). Through open coding, the researcher writes continual notes and headings throughout the transcripts of the interview data, revisiting them as needed in an effort to identify all aspects of the phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). After the open coding process is complete, categories and themes are generated from these notes and the data are organized within them. In the abstraction process, concepts are created and refined into a manageable number of concepts that do not overlap, and a general description of the research topic is generated from comparing data within the categories and sub-categories that were generated (Elo et al., 2014). Finally,

through a process called *axial coding*, the researcher re-reads the texts transcribed from the data through a lens of the concepts and categories created during the abstraction process. This is done in order to confirm that the interview responses are adequately represented by these concepts and categories, and then further explore how the concepts, categories, and sub-categories are related (Kendall, 1999).

In addition to interview transcripts, the reflective journal and field notes mentioned above provided additional sources of data and resources for reflection. In analyzing the data, I examined and reflected on the content in order to isolate themes. First, in an open coding-type process, I identified the larger, more holistic themes from each interview transcript and recorded them on the transcript itself. Next, I identified individual elements throughout the transcript, which are experience-based statements or phrases, assigned each a code, and recorded the code for each above or below the holistic statements on the transcript. In an abstraction-type process, I refined contextual concepts and their elements, looking for overlap and relatedness. In combination with reflection, which I recorded in my reflection journal, these overlapping concepts and elements will influence the content of subsequent interviews. Finally, through reflection and consideration for the holistic theme, I formulated my analysis by reviewing the essence of each statement in relation to the context of the discussion, moving back and forth between context and elements to create written interpretations of the lived experience of State 4-H Council members (Sloan & Bowe, 2013; van Manen, 1997).

According to Elo and Kyngäs (2008), the most widely used criteria for assessing the validity of qualitative research is *trustworthiness,* a term coined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to indicate that the data supports an argument that the inquiry's findings are

"worth paying attention to" (p. 2). Elo et al. (2016) maintain that trustworthiness is particularly important in inductive qualitative analysis, as the resulting categories are created directly from raw research data. While several criteria have been proposed to evaluate trustworthiness (including peer debriefings and stakeholder checks), Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe four aspects of trustworthiness that have enjoyed wide use by qualitative researchers for several years: *truth value,* which reflects the researcher's confidence that the research design and context have yielded data that is accurate; *applicability,* which refers to the degree to which the findings of the study can be applied to other contexts and with other groups; *consistency,* which refers to the extent to which a study of the same individuals in similar contexts would yield the same results; and *neutrality*, which refers to the extent that the procedures and results are free from bias (Kreftking, 1991).

Significance of the Study

This research will focus on the experience at the pinnacle of leadership in the nation's largest youth development organization (Bruce, 2003; Lerner et. al., 2013), but it has implications far beyond 4-H. Indeed, the principles that weave throughout Positive Youth Development theory may be found in the work of practitioners in many youth-serving programs and organizations, as they utilize developmentally appropriate practices to achieve desired outcomes. This study will utilize the unique conditions of the State 4-H Council to identify strategies and approaches that practitioners in the field of youth development can adapt to their own programmatic settings in order to achieve positive developmental outcomes.

The 4-H setting provides an ideal environment for this type of research, as 4-H has been quantitatively demonstrated to have a stronger impact on positive youth outcomes than any other major youth-serving organization (Lerner et. al., 2013). However, there is a large gap in the research regarding this elite aspect of the 4-H experience. The gap in research on state 4-H councils is likely due to (a) the small number of individuals with charge of the state 4-H councils in each state, (b) the even smaller number who are researchers, and (c) the multitude of approaches among state programs that is made possible by the autonomy afforded faculty members in a Cooperative Extension environment.

Underlying this diversity in programmatic approaches is a common organizational culture of positive youth development, which makes possible significant benefits. This study has the potential to contribute to the literature, suggesting directions and implications for practice at the national, state, regional, and local levels. The study will accomplish this by grounding the findings in PYD theory, in order to inform best practices through the lens of commonly shared organizational values.

Summary of Section One

4-H is the youth development wing of the Cooperative Extension system. This study focused on the impacts of experience as a member of Missouri's State 4-H Council, a group of youth elected by their peers to represent the voice of youth at the state level of the MU Extension 4-H program. While a great deal research involving impacts of 4-H has been conducted, most of this research has been practitioner-based. Although growing, the body of research in the scholarly literature on 4-H impacts is still relatively

small, despite the enormous reach of the organization. Within this body of literature, I was able to locate a total of three studies specific to the state 4-H council experience.

This study explored the impacts of experience on Missouri's State 4-H Council in the areas of social embeddedness (behavior resulting from the social aspects of their involvement on Council), leadership empowerment (strengths and capacities developed through Council experience), and thriving (the ability to establish adaptive individual-context relationships and pursue their strongest interests). It was qualitative in nature, employing a phenomenological approach to explore and interpret the individual experiences of the participants of this study through a positive youth development theoretical framework.

Working with State 4-H Council alumni recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, data collection took place through individual interviews. The data were analyzed using hermeneutic phenomenological variations of standard qualitative evaluation techniques, which included open coding, abstraction, and axial coding. With trustworthiness established and the evaluation complete, this study will fill a gap in the scholarly research regarding the pinnacle leadership experience common to state programs in the nation's largest youth development organization and have implications for other youth-serving organizations as well.

Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms appear throughout this document:

4-H: The youth development arm of Cooperative Extension, serving youth ages 5-18.

Adaptive Relationships: Relationships between individual and context in which both benefit.

Cooperative Extension: An outreach organization, based in each Land Grant University and formally established by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, tasked with extending the resources of each Land Grant University to the general public. Also called University Extension.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology: An approach to phenomenology developed by Martin Heidegger, protégé of Edmund Husserl, which emphasizes understanding over simple description in the quest to understand the human experience.

Husserlian Phenomenology: The original approach to phenomenology developed by Edmund Husserl, which seeks to describe individual human experience by "bracketing" preconceptions during the data collection process.

Leadership Empowerment: The development of strengths and capacities that help an individual achieve mutually influential and adaptive individual-context relationships.

Phenomenology: A qualitative method of inquiry in which the objective is to capture the essence of an individual's experience.

Social Embeddedness: Term used to describe the effect of an individual's relationship with a group and/or organization on their individual actions and decisions.

Sparks: A self-identified or self-realized interest, skill, or capacity that an individual finds rewarding and has strong internal motivation to pursue.

State 4-H Council: A group of youth enrolled in a state's 4-H program, either elected by their peers or selected by faculty (depending on state), and tasked with representing the youth voice at the state level of 4-H programming.

Thriving: The degree to which a child or adolescent identifies and pursues their sparks, and has adaptive and mutually beneficial individual-context relationships.

SECTION TWO:

PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY

Organizational Context of Missouri 4-H

As the preceding information illustrates, the structure of Missouri 4-H is fairly complex. Bolman and Deal (2008) provide an approach to enhancing our understanding of complex organizations, recognizing that they are difficult to categorize neatly because the people who comprise them cannot be described uniformly. Bolman and Deal (2008) utilize four "frames" – *structural, human resource, political,* and *symbolic* – to provide perspective into complex human organizations, and I believe it provides a useful method for understanding the organizational context of Missouri 4-H more clearly.

Structural Perspective

The structural frame focuses upon the degree to which the fit between an organization's current circumstances (e.g., goals, resources, and infrastructure) and its structure yield efficiency and strong performance. This fit is reflected in how well an organization meets expectations, the degree to which it helps employees get their work done, and in the organization's exchanges with external constituencies. An organization's structure includes such components as established roles and responsibilities, standard operating procedures, and individuals who are a good fit for their roles within the system. The structural frame assumes that: (a) achieving goals and objectives is fundamentally important; (b) specialized roles and division of labor are integral to this achievement; (c) the advantages of diversity can be leveraged through proper coordination and control; (d) an organization functions best by adhering to structures which fit its circumstances and resources, rather than being influenced by individual agendas of its members and (e) organizations must respond to problems by

analyzing and restructuring when changes in circumstances and resources reduce the efficiency of the current structure (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

As the youth development arm of Cooperative Extension, the origins of 4-H trace back to President Lincoln's signing of the Morrill Act of 1862, which provided grants of land on which states could build universities. On the national level, a widespread lack of accessible education for non-wealthy citizens was viewed by many as a structural deficiency. In response, legislation was introduced to restructure the educational climate by creating affordable access to a college education. In the years that followed, Land Grant University faculty worked to increase the benefit of these new institutions by extending the resources of the local university to the surrounding rural communities. Official coordination and control of these efforts was established by the creation of the Cooperative Extension Service by the Smith-Lever act of 1914, formalizing this *extension* of research-based knowledge as a mission of the Land Grant University, and adopting 4-H as a core program by 1924 (www.4-h.org/about/4-h-history; http://4h.missouri.edu/about4h/who.htm). This action aligned with the institutional goals of the Land Grant Universities, while the formation of county Extension councils and 4-H councils would eventually result in an extended infrastructure as well.

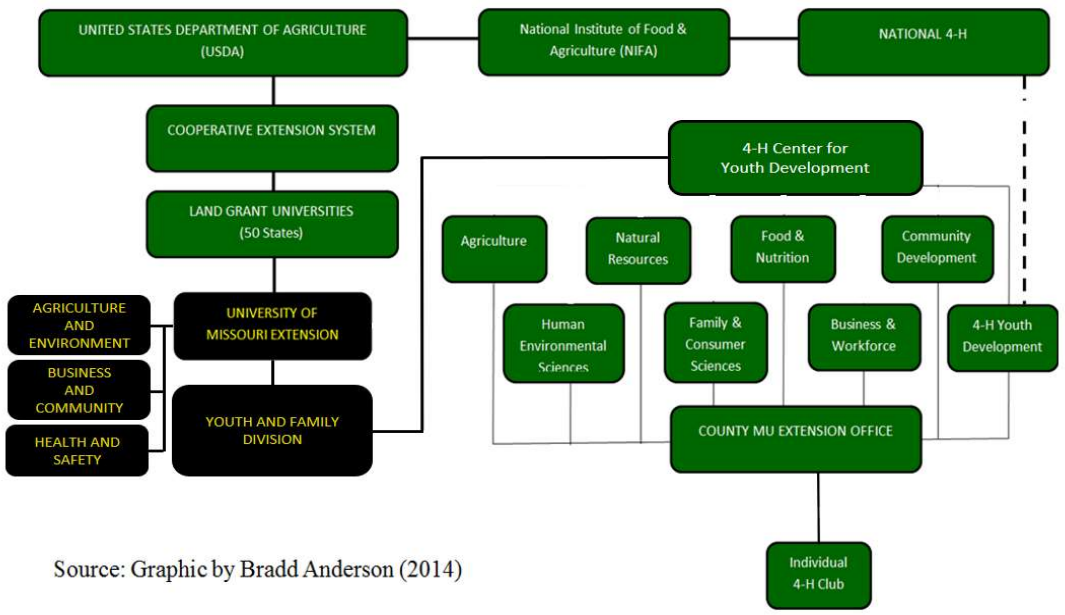
In the years that followed, 4-H has grown to become the nation's oldest and largest youth development and mentoring organization, with faculty based in 3,007 counties of the United States, working through 110 Land Grant Universities, and reaching over 6,000,000 young people each year (www.4-h.org). In Missouri, over 22,000 children between the ages of 5-18 participated in one of the state's 804 active 4-H clubs in 2014 (4h.missouri.edu), and others engage with 4-H through afterschool programs,

special interest activities, and large events. County Extension councils and 4-H councils work with local government to shore up support, and with county Extension faculty to help ensure that local programming efforts align with the needs of county residents.

At the state and national levels, 4-H is a hybrid entity within the world of Cooperative Extension, nested within the organizational hierarchy of each Land Grant University while also belonging to a national organization with a federal chain of command separate from the Cooperative Extension system (see figure 1). A primary organizational goal of 4-H is to create learning opportunities and promote development of life skills for youth ages 5-18, within the "mission mandate" areas of citizenship, healthy living, and science (4-h.org, 2013**)**. This is accomplished through a multi-tiered infrastructure constructed through partnerships between community citizens, county government, the state's Land Grant Universities (both 1860 and 1890 institutions), and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture of the USDA. In order to carry out organizational goals within this infrastructure, 4-H has three primary resources: professional faculty/staff, adult 4-H volunteers, and the youth themselves. Division of labor occurs among these resources, with each having specialized roles.

Youth who participate in 4-H find themselves in a dual role, serving as both a programmatic resource and the 4-H organization's primary constituency. For most participating youth, the main conduit for 4-H program delivery occurs through their 4-H club. These clubs are established and managed within their individual communities, and youth often share in the division of labor in their club. They may take on leadership roles such as president, vice-president, secretary, or treasurer, or they may represent their club on the county's 4-H council, which works to address structural deficiencies by informally

Figure 1. 4-H Organizational Structure



Source: Graphic by Bradd Anderson (2014)

analyzing and aligning local 4-H programming efforts and Extension resources with the community's needs.

In Missouri 4-H, the 4-H youth professional assigned to the county's MU Extension office directs Extension resources and manages the volunteers who carry out the county's 4-H program delivery, recruiting, screening, and training new volunteers in the policies and program goals of MU Extension and Missouri 4-H. Central to these goals is the organizational view of youth as resources, and the creation of opportunities to for youth experience leadership roles. Potential volunteers complete a background check and undergo volunteer orientation training after its successful completion. Along with a historical perspective of Missouri 4-H, this training covers the 4-H organizational structure, key policies and procedures, an overview of the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence, and principles of experiential learning.

Some aspects of the 4-H professional role require what Bolman and Deal (2008) refer to as *vertical coordination* in order to achieve the organizational goals of 4-H, acting within the required authority of their role to conduct background checks, make personnel decisions, and ensure that all pertinent laws and policies are adhered to. Within the parameters of their vertical coordination responsibilities, however, the professional's role also requires a great deal of *lateral coordination*, working flexibly with youth and volunteers as valued partners in areas of shared responsibility. This may include yielding to alternate ideas about a club's program priorities, incorporating youth-generated solutions in determining how those priorities will be addressed, and building consensus among multiple viewpoints that are often in conflict with each other.

Human Resources Perspective

In contrast to the structural frame, which focuses on the roles people fill and the policies they implement, the human resources frame offers a different perspective on organizations by focusing on the people themselves (Bolman & Deal, 2008). When aligned with the needs of the organization, the talents, skills, and dedication that individuals contribute to it can provide mutually beneficial rewards. Similarly, when the needs and offerings between individuals and an organization are not well aligned, the consequences can be negative for either or both. The human resources frame assumes that: (a) organizations exist to serve human needs, (b) the relationship between individual and organization is symbiotic, and (c) can be beneficial or detrimental depending on the fit between them (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The approach of the human resources frame allows us to gauge the *fit,* or alignment of needs and offerings, between individuals and organizations. This concept of

fit is a recurring theme throughout the 4-H organization, from the present day to the historical contexts that led to the formation of the Land Grant Universities in which it resides. Prior to Lincoln's signing of the Morrill Act in 1862, the fit between working class individuals and the offerings of postsecondary education was poor. Academic institutions were geared mostly towards abstract liberal arts disciplines such as philosophy, religion, and literature, which Kress (2014) notes "was not very helpful or practical" (p. 5) for working class individuals. Even if working class families had been able to access higher education at that time, the benefits it provided would have offered little tangible benefit in the context of their station in life. The creation of Land Grant Universities sought to improve this fit, offering education that was both financially accessible and practical, such as engineering and agricultural science, which learners could apply and benefit from directly in the course of their daily lives.

The concept of fit played an important role in the years that followed, as faculty from recently established Land Grant Universities sought to extend knowledge of new research-based agricultural practices to rural areas beyond the university walls and met with mixed results. Farmers in the surrounding communities often saw little alignment between their needs and the new technology-based approaches being promoted, preferring instead to stick to their existing time-tested practices. Some educators ultimately found success in shifting their outreach focus to youth, who were frequently more receptive to new ideas that diverged from tradition. One particularly effective strategy involved organizing competitive events, such as yield contests, between adults using traditional methods and the youth using the new Extension technologies. The strategy proved successful in illustrating the fit between the new information and their

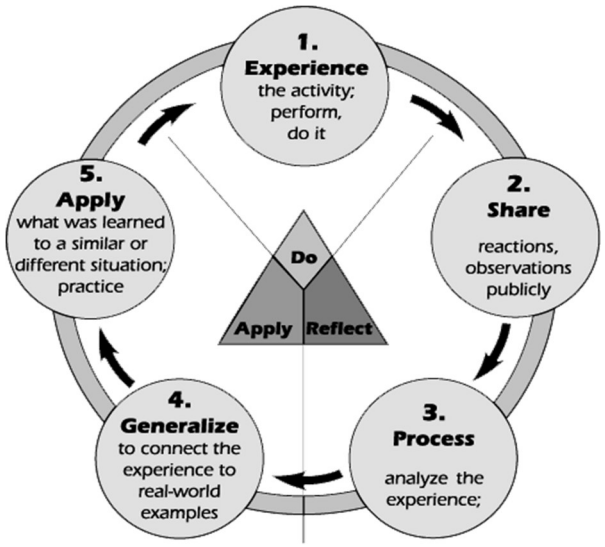
existing priorities, and the strategy proved successful. New technology-based agricultural practices were introduced to many communities, as adults who lost decisively to their children in these competitions became more interested in the new technologies themselves.

Over time, the focus of 4-H expanded beyond science and technology training to a larger youth development approach that also includes citizenship, healthy living, and workforce preparation. This approach continues to strive for alignment between program offerings and the needs of individuals across the lifespan. Just as with the engineering and agricultural skills that were very practical in the 1860s, the intent of this expanded focus is to provide content that benefits youth as they prepare for jobs that may not have been invented yet in a modern global economy.

4-H programming takes place at the county level through an informal education approach, defined here as one that creates opportunities for voluntary learning which take place within a range of environments in conjunction with other activities (Chisholm, 2013). These programs are designed with the intent of meeting human needs by fostering what hare deemed "essential elements" for the healthy development of youth: belonging, independence, generosity, and mastery. Program delivery is based on an experiential learning model (Figure 2) developed by Kolb (1984) and modified by 4-H (Ferrari, Linville, & Valentine, 2003) that involves reflecting on new knowledge and applying it to their current life situations (Barker & Ansorge, 2007). This method of learning uses a constructivist approach, combining problem-based learning and authentic experiences, in a fun, engaging setting, with adults acting as facilitators of the overall learning process (Barker & Ansorge, 2007; Ferrari & Turner, 2006).

The volunteers who serve as 4-H club leaders work in partnership with 4-H professionals to create opportunities for youth to explore interests and develop their skills, striving to cultivate youth-adult partnerships and encouraging youth to connect with opportunities in ways that are meaningful and developmentally appropriate.

Figure 2. Kolb's Experiential Learning Model



Note. From "Life Skill Development of Youth Participants of the Tennessee 4-H Beef Skillathon, by Harris, J.M., Stripling, C.T., Stephens, C.A., & Loveday, H.D., 2016, *Journal of Youth Development, 11*(1), p. 90.

The human resources frame recognizes that individuals draw many positive benefits from their roles and associations with organizations, just as organizations rely on them to function (Bolman & Deal, 2008). As mentioned above, 4-H volunteers play a critical role in the most important aspects of program delivery, and these adults draw many benefits from the association as well. Intrinsic rewards include an opportunity to engage in prosocial activities that improve their communities, working on behalf of a population they value, a sense of purpose from guiding a developing group of youth, and feelings of belonging from working alongside others of all ages who also value these types of efforts. In addition, the 4-H organization offers extrinsic rewards, including personal growth through formal training to expand their knowledge of child and youth development, recognition as an official 4-H volunteer (including a nametag) after completion of the training, additional annual recognition for

years of service at county events, and even attention from local media. As the human resources frame illustrates, the combination of internal and external rewards provide powerful benefits for many individuals who serve in the critical role of 4-H volunteer.

Political Perspective

While the structural frame focuses on roles within an organization and the human resources frame focuses on the people who fill them, Bolman and Deal's (2008) political frame considers organizations to be coalitions of individuals and groups acting in their own interests and leveraging their resources to serve these interests, which vary according to their individual beliefs, values, and understanding of reality. They accrue power to accomplish this through the information they have, their positions within the organization, their relationships with other individuals, and through coalitions that ultimately serve their interests (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Cooperative Extension programs as a whole are funded through a combination of federal, state, and county dollars, which creates political dimensions in the need for input and approval from stakeholders. The reliance on volunteers for the club-based program delivery model creates opportunities and empowers the volunteer to support or oppose the work of an Extension professional. As a result, volunteers and community members are viewed as valued partners with an active role in the work of Extension, rather than simply as clients. This view takes the form of county councils, which advise on local program priorities and influence the local aspects of the Extension funding stream. Program-specific councils, such as a county 4-H council, work within the county 4-H program to advise on priorities and participate in the decision-making processes as program priorities are set and special events are planned.

This power afforded volunteers in the Extension organization impacts their ability to direct scarce resources in support of their interests, which are sometimes competing and usually different from those of other individuals. This ensures that conflict is central to the 4-H organization, just as it is with any other organization, and the assumption of enduring differences found in the political frame can be seen in both the professional and volunteer roles of the 4-H organization.

Enduring conflict between volunteers and 4-H professionals. Enduring conflicts can arise between 4-H program volunteers and the professionals charged with the programs oversight, and Bolman and Deal (2008) note that conflict is "particularly likely to occur at boundaries or interfaces" (p. 207). Indeed, most of the volunteer-professional conflict I have observed in my 18 year Extension career has occurred over disagreements about how a role or function should be carried out, most frequently between a program volunteer who is invested in the program and a professional who is responsible for the program. Among communities with a longer history of program involvement, it is common to find long-established 4-H traditions held by stakeholders and partners. While these traditions can provide a community embeddedness that benefits the 4-H program, it is also true that innovation and change can be perceived as threats to the cultural norms of a group of volunteers. Thus, as 4-H professionals strive to position their program towards the future or adapt their program to underserved audiences, they do so with a high level of dependence on the approval of those stakeholders who are currently being served. These stakeholders may form alliances as disagreements arise, and strong human relationships between the 4-H professional and

their council members are extremely important in the professional's ability to maintain a program that is accessible, responsive, and innovative.

The political frame recognizes the importance of alliances and networks, and I have observed that disapproving volunteers generally approach their fellow volunteers for support. Hierarchical conflict creates possibilities for lower levels to ignore or subvert the directives of the authority in charge (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 206), and this is particularly true when one's fellow volunteers comprise the county extension council. A county extension council can be instrumental in amplifying a volunteer's concern throughout the organizational hierarchy, as Extension relies on the partnership of a supportive community to carry out its mission. Through this type of pressure, a County Program Director or other Specialist may be swayed to support the position of the volunteer or support the professional judgement of their colleague.

Enduring conflict within professional roles. Youth Program Assistants, for example, may experience conflict with their supervising Youth Specialist, who determines the level of autonomy they have to make decisions in the course of their duties. The specialist has overall responsibility for how the 4-H program is carried out in the county the assistant serves, but usually has less familiarity with the individual personalities, coalitions, and relationships the assistant must navigate in order to do their job effectively. As their responsibilities are spread more widely, the number of additional counties the Youth Specialist is responsible for often impacts their ability to understand the complexities of any given one.

A similar dynamic occurs at the next level in the organizational hierarchy, as Youth Specialists sometimes bristle at the State 4-H Specialists at the 4-H Center on the

Land Grant University campus, who have authority over the programs and policies they and their assistants must work within. These state faculty members must work more holistically, towards the interests of the state program as a whole. However, with 115 Missouri counties overseen by 37 specialists and 69 assistants or associates, state faculty must create statewide policies knowing that they will never understand the intricacies of each county, account for all individual differences, meet each individual need, or gain maximum benefit from each individual relationship. As a result, enduring conflicts are once again unavoidable.

Finally, enduring conflicts are known to occur between all of the professionals previously mentioned and those above them in the land grant institution hierarchy. They include the Extension Director, who oversees the program directors, the Chancellor, and the university system President. I have observed in my professional experience that a volunteer who disagrees with a personnel decision of a Youth Program Assistant may escalate their complaint to the Youth Specialist, and then to the State Program Director if the Youth Specialist backs the decision of the assistant. If the program director also backs the decision, the volunteer may engage those above the program director by appealing to their elected officials for help. Though outside the organizational hierarchy, these elected officials interface with the university at higher points than the Program Director, and can serve their self-interests by accruing political capital through advocacy on behalf of their constituent.

Questions from legislators to the Extension Director require answers and usually result in a thorough review of the situation. Due to the reliance of the university on the support of state legislators for funding in a difficult fiscal cycle, an Extension Director is

always aware that the legislator acting in their self-interest would next approach the Chancellor. If that were to occur, the Chancellor would have questions of his or her own, because they in turn answer to the UM System President who is responsible for keeping the entire organization funded and operational. Acting on both self-interest and the interests of the organization, the Extension Director might reasonably surmise that appeasing a volunteer with a coalition of legislator support is the best course, despite their desire to support their subordinates in decisions they themselves would also make.

The political perspective allows us to understand why the Extension Director may conclude that the damage to the larger system caused by disgruntled legislators (not allowed to serve their own self-interests) would far outweigh the damage to the individual Extension program that would occur at the local level by supporting the volunteer over the professional responsible for the program's oversight. Quite simply, the former has system-wide ramifications while the latter does not. A structural perspective would struggle to reconcile to utility of allowing a professional role to carry responsibility but ultimately no authority, and a human resources perspective might veer into a retroactive analysis of a fit between the individuals and their respective roles. Only the political frame provides insight on how the overall system may be best served through undermining the interests of an individual statewide program (4-H) by granting a volunteer more power than several layers of the 4-H organization's paid professionals.

Recognizing the potential for these conflicts, there are varieties of politically minded practices built into the Missouri 4-H organization to address them. One example is the practice of *regional category* meetings, which involve the specialists and assistants within each Extension region of the state and a state staff member who is assigned to be

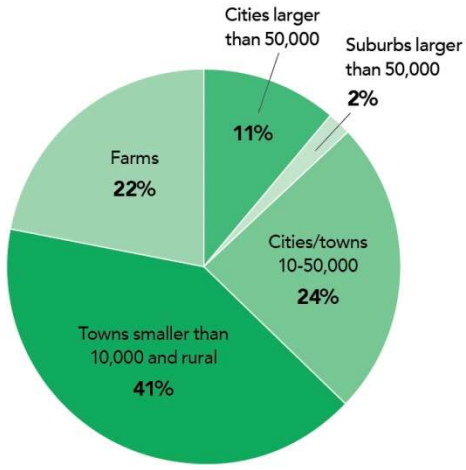
their regional liaison. The specialists and assistants meet periodically to collaborate on region-wide programs, share information and insights, develop shared programmatic priorities, share concerns and identify solutions. The state staff member who attends represents the voice of the 4-H Center, communicating the state faculty perspective in important issues and gathering insights from regional staff that can be used to inform state office decisions. A second phase of this practice involves the annual Program Policy and Advisory Committee, in which each region sends two specialists to meet as a group with their 4-H Center counterparts, working to accomplish the same objectives of the regional category meetings on a statewide scale. At both types of meetings, individuals have opportunity to have input into decisions that impact them, share their perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches, and develop a shared set of values, beliefs, and understandings of their shared realities.

Symbolic Perspective

The symbolic frame focuses on the meanings that people create, the beliefs that they develop, the faith on which they act, and the paradigms that help them make sense of an ambiguous world, presupposing that the meaning of an event or action is more important than the event or action itself (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Missouri 4-H views youth as individuals who have the potential to be leaders in the present, rather than simply as future leaders who may someday assume leadership roles upon maturity. Youth who pursue continually greater levels of 4-H responsibility and leadership opportunities do so within this culture of active involvement. This symbolism is reflected in the Missouri 4-H organizational mission to engage youth as "valued, contributing members of their communities in partnership with caring adults," and its vision to create

an environment in which "youth and adults learn, grow and work together for positive change" (4h.missouri.edu). The symbolic frame recognizes that events will be experienced differently by different individuals (Bolman & Deal, 2008), and 4-H offers opportunities for growth that can be applied in a myriad of individual ways. Through an experiential learning process, 4-H youth are involved in the visioning, planning, decision-making, and evaluation processes of the initiatives they create.

Figure 2: Distribution of 4-H Youth



Source: Missouri 4-H Foundation 2013 Annual Report

The most recognizable symbol of the 4-H organization is the 4-H clover, a green four-leaf clover with a white H on each leaf, which has existed in its present form since 1911. The white H's represents Head, Heart, Hands, and Health. They are integral to the 4-H pledge, which states, "I pledge my hands to larger service, my heart to greater loyalty, my head to clearer thinking, and my health to better living, for my club, my community, my country, and my world" (source: http://4-h.org/about/what-is-4-h/4-h-pledge/). Since 1939, the clover has been classified as a federal mark, rather than a logo, and enjoys the same protection as the Olympic rings and the U.S. Presidential Seal (source: http://4-hhistorypreservation.com/history/clover/). Responsibility and stewardship for the 4-H clover rests with the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.

The symbolic frame recognizes that perception often diverges with reality, and 4-H is an excellent illustration of this. Around one fifth of 4-H'ers in Missouri live on

farms, while most come from cities and small towns (see Figure 2). For many who are not involved with the organization, however, 4-H evokes images of farms, livestock, cookie baking, dress sewing, and images of rural youth showing livestock at county fairs. For them, the 4-H clover symbolizes a program that primarily serves rural and agricultural interests, helping young people on farms develop responsibility and other positive character traits. I have found that many are surprised to learn that Missouri 4-H offers almost 200 projects, which include robotics, filmmaking, entrepreneurship, shooting sports and geospatial sciences.

Leadership Context of the State 4-H Council

In Missouri, the State 4-H Council is a central part of strategy of the 4-H Center for Youth Development (i.e., the state 4-H office) in ensuring that Missouri 4-H programs are attuned to the needs and interests of youth. Four faculty and 38 youth ages 14-19 from the University of Missouri and Lincoln University (the state's 1860 Land Grant University) participate on the State 4-H Council. The Council consists of four youth representatives of the MU Extension 4-H program from each of the seven Extension-defined region of the state, one youth representative from each Lincoln University Extension region, and an executive committee that consists of four officers and four state representatives. The State 4-H Council is guided by four advisors, which consist of two adult faculty advisors from the University of Missouri, one adult staff member from Lincoln University, the council coordinator which is myself. In my role as a state 4-H faculty member, I have coordinated the State 4-H Council from 2007 to the present time.

Although sometimes referred to by other names, the state 4-H council experiential leadership experience is a traditional part of most state 4-H programs, and membership

on such a council is commonly considered the pinnacle of a 4-H career (Bruce, 2003). This body is referred to as the *State Teen Council* by the state 4-H programs in Kentucky and New Hampshire, the *State 4-H Leadership Team* in Louisiana, and the *State 4-H Youth Leadership Team* in Illinois (personal communications, June 30 – July 30, 2015). While the specific role descriptions vary from state to state, these individuals are commonly viewed as ambassadors of the program to outside organizations, representatives of the voice of youth within their organization, and role models to other 4-H youth at the county and regional levels.

In Missouri, the State 4-H Council works closely with 4-H faculty in expanded leadership roles as key representatives of Missouri 4-H. These include (a) expanded responsibilities for resource management or service in liaison roles to various extension entities, (b) providing support to county and regional 4-H program events, and (c) assisting with the planning and implementation of the two largest statewide 4-H leadership development events.

Expanded Responsibilities

First, additional roles and responsibilities are built into the State 4-H Council's annual officer selection process. In this process, which takes place at the Council's regular meeting in February, two candidates are selected from the Regional Representatives to run for each office – either president, vice-president, secretary, or treasurer – at the State 4-H Congress event in the summer. The one who wins the popular vote of the Congress delegates is elected to the officer role, while the candidate who did not win assumes a specific responsibility in a state representative role. Together, the four officers and four state representatives comprise the Executive Committee, which works

together with the Council Coordinator and other Adult Advisors to guide the State 4-H Council for the year ahead.

The candidate who does not win the presidency becomes a trustee on the board of the Missouri 4-H Foundation for a 2-year term, serving as a youth voice in Foundation deliberations. The candidate who does not win the vice-presidency becomes the liaison to the MU Extension Council, serving as a youth voice in their deliberations and ensuring that 4-H remains a conscious part of their strategic plans. The candidate who does not win the treasurer role becomes coordinator of Kids Helping Kids, a grant that Missouri 4-H professionals can apply for on behalf of 4-H families in their counties who have suffered losses from tragedy or natural disasters. Finally, the candidate who does not win the secretary position becomes coordinator of the County Youth Liaisons, a position managed by 4-H professionals at the county level, which serves as an entry-level service opportunity to youth who may someday aspire to State 4-H Council roles.

Support to Regional and County 4-H Events

State 4-H Council members provide valuable assistance at local and regional 4-H events such as weeklong summer 4-H camps, regional energizer events, lock-ins, and county recognition events. Many 4-H faculty find value in Council participation at these events, utilizing their program experience and leadership skills to model the positive opportunities personal development that can come through continued 4-H involvement.

In addition, members of the State 4-H Council have a presence at most other state 4-H events, representing Council as the voice of youth, assisting with operations, and serving as visible role models for younger participants. The presumed impact is similar to that at regional and county events, but amplified with higher visibility to larger

numbers of participants that a state event provides and the greater levels of leadership responsibility that state 4-H faculty members encourage.

Planning and Implementation of Largescale Events

In addition to serving in ambassadorial roles at state 4-H programs, the Council takes a lead role with planning and implementation at two major state events, *Teen Conference* and *State 4-H Congress*. Teen Conference participants, ages 11-13, attend a day of workshops on the University of Missouri campus and evening activities at a large conference center, staying overnight at the hotel and enjoying additional group activities the next morning. State 4-H Council members plan and lead the workshops and assemblies, interview and select a motivational speaker, and facilitate transitions throughout the event. Activities surrounding the university campus experience include a dance, assemblies, science activities, and other entertainment. The workshops focus on: (a) service to others, (b) mastery of a new skill that delegates can take back and teach in their home communities, and (c) providing an opportunity to learn about cultures from other parts of the world. Throughout Teen Conference an emphasis is placed on opportunities that await 4-H'ers as teenagers. For many participants Teen Conference represents an opportunity to build confidence through the experience of independence, as it is often their first overnight trip away from home.

At a similar event designed for older youth, State 4-H Congress participants ages 14-18 experience living on the MU campus for a week, staying in college dorms and eating at campus dining hall facilities. These youth participate in educational workshops that they select, enjoy dances in the evenings, and elect the peers that will represent them for the coming year as officers and regional representatives on the State 4-H Council.

Those aspiring to run for Council, either as new members or returning members, give speeches to their regions, which vote to fill the four Regional Representative positions for the coming year. Those selected by Council from among their ranks to run for officer positions give their speeches to the entire Congress delegation, after which the voting process begins. State 4-H Council members select the theme, interview and select a keynote speaker, plan and lead all assemblies at this event, lead regional activities, and assist groups with transitions between locations on the MU Campus.

SECTION THREE:

SCHOLARLY REVIEW

Adolescence is a time of profound change, as children begin to develop adult reasoning abilities, navigate puberty, and seek to develop their individual voice as they explore and identify their own interests, values, and beliefs. As social scientists study human development across the lifespan, contemporary theoretical frames involve models of relational development systems that emphasize the role of mutually influential relationships between developing individuals and their changing contexts (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lwein-Bizan, 2011).

It has been well established that peer relationships become increasingly important during this time, playing important roles in helping teens cope with the difficulties of these developmental tasks (Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012). Through these relationships, adolescents negotiate identity, gain subject matter expertise, learn social skills, develop important technical skills, and build social capital (Ahn, 2011; Palfrey, 2011). Individual contexts (such as family, friends, school, and communities) also change tremendously during adolescence, often becoming infused with greater levels of sexuality, violence, substance use, and other environmental risk factors (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010).

One reflection of the importance of this developmental period is the plethora of organized youth programs that seek to address the needs of teens. These include 4-H, the YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Scouting, Junior Achievement, thousands of community faith-based youth programs, and others. As the nation's oldest youth development program, 4-H has reached over 25 million youth since its inception (www.4-h.org). Coordinated through state Land Grant Universities as the youth development arm of the Cooperative Extension Service, 4-H is uniquely situated to offer

a direct connection between research and practice in ways unparalleled by other youth-serving organizations. This review will examine emerging scholarly approaches to the understanding of adolescent development, explore key components of emerging research in this field, establish where 4-H youth development programs are nested within this body of research, and identify implications for practices that promote adaptive individual-context relationships in this critical life stage.

Approaches to the Study of Adolescent Development

Through various historical, political, social and cultural lenses, the period of adolescence has long been a topic of interest to scholars. While there have been a number of approaches employed over the years, the deficit approach and the Positive Youth Development approach bear the greatest pertinence to this study.

Deficit Approach

For the last 50 years, the vast majority of research on adolescent social and emotional development has been anchored in a prevailing mindset of developmental deficits, with a primary focus on prevention and remediation of risk behavior in "broken" individuals (Damon, 2004; Geldof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2012; Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2013; Rennekamp, 2014; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). This *deficit approach* (also referred to less frequently as a *problems approach* or *pathology approach*) has roots in the criminal justice system and psychoanalytic mental health models (Damon, 2004).

Prior to the mid-1970s, there were no systematic empirical studies of adolescence within a family context (Steinberg, 2001). Psychologically troubled youth, in such venues as juvenile detention and mental health facilities, provided convenient samples for

researchers studying adolescence, and yielded results that supported and built upon the narrative of Hall's (1904) famous depiction of adolescence as a time of "storm and stress." The research itself was often quite strong, but the inaccuracies arose when findings from these studies of troubled youth were incorrectly generalized to the larger adolescent population (Steinberg, 2001). Contrasting the practices of this time with contemporary scholarship in his wide-ranging review of adolescent research methodology, Steinberg (2001) notes that

> there were a handful of studies scattered in various journals and some widely read theoretical treatises, but it would have been a challenge, to say the least, to draw many firm conclusions about the nature of parent–adolescent relationships from the published literature, even as late as 1980. (p. 2)

Essentially, criticisms of the deficit approach include its inherent failures to recognize (1) the particular strengths of the adolescent period, such as teens' inherent plasticity (Lerner, 1984), (2) the adolescents potential role in positive mutually influential relationships with the contexts in which they live (Geldof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2012), and that (3) changes in their relationship with those contexts can enhance individual success (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Lerner et al., 2011; Ramey & Krasnor, 2012; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). Symptomatic of these failures, Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) observed that adolescent descriptors widespread within the literature on teen emotional and behavioral traits frequently range from pejorative to demeaning, lamenting that "youth are labeled with 'd' words such as disturbed, disordered, deprived, deviant, disadvantaged, disruptive, disrespectful, and disobedient" (p. 2).

Positive Youth Development Approach

A relatively new theoretical framework of *positive youth development* (PYD) has arisen in the last 2 decades, which acknowledges the existence of adversity and risk but reframes the adolescent period of opportunity. Instead of a focus on minimizing undesirable behaviors and outcomes, PYD theory takes a strength-based approach to examine the unique opportunities this developmental period provides for creating long-lasting positive impact. For example, PYD theorists note that adolescence is also a period of unparalleled self-determination, as youth enjoy greater mobility, new levels of autonomy to choose how they spend their time, and little responsibility to impede those decisions. Coupled with their burgeoning cognitive abilities, social interests, and drive for identity development, this autonomy creates great potential for change, or *plasticity,* and capacity for mutually influential relationships with the contexts in which they live (Geldof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2012; Lerner et al., 2013). The relationship between individual and context regulates the course of development, and when the relationship is *adaptive,* meaning that it benefits both individual and context, it increases the likelihood that the individual will thrive (Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner et al., 2011).

Although several different perspectives are reflected within the PYD theoretical framework, the various approaches share two primary threads of commonality. First, rather than describing development solely in terms of the individual, PYD emphasizes an interactive, adaptive relationship between the individual and their contexts (Geldof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2012; Lerner et al., 2011; Ramey & Krasnor, 2012). This relationship is described as *bidirectional*, with individual and context each having an impact on the other that can facilitate mutual growth (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010).

Through this relationship, PYD also recognizes the potential of youth to change and grow, becoming more competent and contributing members of the communities in which they live (Arnett, 2006; Damon, 2004; Durlak et al., 2007; Halverson, 2010; Lerner, 2005).

Secondly, in shifting the focus of adolescent social and emotional development research from the pathology-focused deficit perspective of the last fifty years (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010) to strategies that facilitate positive youth outcomes (Halverson, 2010), PYD perspectives embrace the concept that all young people have the potential for very positive and productive *trajectories.* These trajectories are not fixed, and can be significantly influenced by the bidirectional relationships between individual and contexts in ways that will continue across an individual's lifespan (Lerner et al., 2013), "when they develop in the context of communities rich in assets aligned with their strengths" (Lerner, 2005, p. 19).

During the years of its development, the PYD framework has been described by practitioners as a developmental process, a philosophical approach to youth programming, and a descriptor for the work of youth development professionals and organizations (Lerner et al., 2013). Despite having evolved separately from developmental psychology (Larson, 2000), Lerner et Al. (2011) assert that the theoretical frames utilized in contemporary, "cutting-edge" developmental science emphasize the very individual-context relationships espoused by PYD theory. These theoretical frames "emphasize that the basic process of human development involves mutually-influential relations between the developing individual and the multiple levels of his/her changing context" (Lerner et al., 2011, p. 1107).

Components of Positive Youth Development

In exploring the impact of State 4-H Council leadership experience, this study utilizes a PYD theoretical framework. This section establishes that framework and identifies the key elements and concepts of PYD theory that form the theoretical base for this inquiry.

Developmental Nutrients

Nested within PYD theory is the concept of developmental nutrients, which Benson (2006) loosely describes as resources or assets related to positive youth development. A well-known example is Scales and Leffert (2004)'s identification of 40 developmental assets, which the researchers organized into eight categories. Scales and Leffert (2004)'s model arranges these 40 assets into eight categories, grouped as either "internal" (*commitment to learning*, *positive values*, *social competencies*, and *positive identity*) or "external" (*support*, *empowerment*, *boundaries and expectations*, and *constructive use of time*) assets (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). In research with over three million middle school and high school students since 1990, youth who had more of these assets consistently exhibited more positive youth development outcomes than those who had fewer assets, with results consistent across gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). However, while this model serves as an important reference, another lesser known model called *The Circle of Courage* pertains more strongly to the focus of this literature review.

The Circle of Courage.

Around the same time that the 40 developmental assets were being developed, a similar effort was underway by Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockem (1990). In the

publication *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future,* these three researchers sought to identify environmental factors exacerbating the plight of youth at risk, by: (a) exploring contemporary developmental research of the time, (b) investigating several areas of alignment between child development needs and traditional Native American educational practices, and (c) examining contributions of early youth work pioneers. The resulting model, titled *The Circle of Courage*, identified *belonging*, *mastery, independence*, and *generosity* as the core needs of children and youth (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990).

The Circle of Courage model was rooted in Benson's (1997) work on assets and risk indicators, Benard's (1992) research on resiliency, the work of Damico and Roth (1994) in synthesizing alternative education research, and Adler's (1990) work on religious plurality (Brendtro, Van Bockern, & Clemenston, 1995). Of particular uniqueness, however, was the linking of Coopersmith's (1967) definitive research on self-concept with the influential work of historical Native American artists, whose portrayal of the cultures of their day suggested that great value was placed on educating and empowering the children (Brendtro, Van Bockern, & Clemenston, 1995). Coopersmith's (1967) focus on the context of family dynamics that impact individual self-esteem went well beyond the conventions of the research of the time, and he concluded that four basic components of self-esteem included *significance, competence, power, and virtue*. Grounding Coopersmith's (1967) conclusions in a Native American cultural frame, Brendtro, Van Bockern, and Clemenston (1995) suggested that (a) significance is nurtured through a culture of belonging, (b) competence could be attained through opportunities for mastery, (c) power is fostered through opportunities to develop

independence, and (d) virtue was reflected through generosity, defined as the opportunity to value and practice service to others (Brendtro, Brokenleg, &Van Bockern, 1990; Kress, 2014; Lerner et al., 2011).

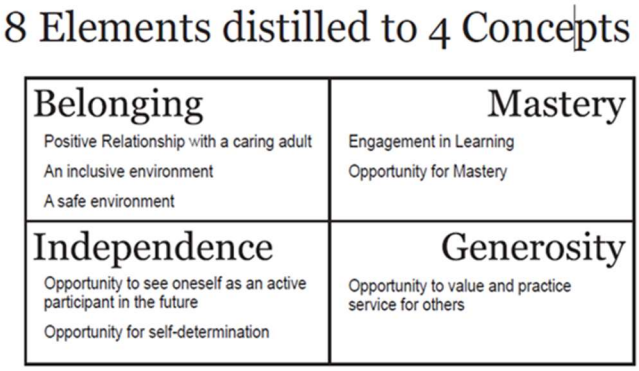
The Essential Elements of 4-H

Around the time that *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future* (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockem, 1990) was published, National 4-H Headquarters sponsored the National 4-H Impact Assessment Project (2001), a report compiled by a national task force of youth development researchers from several states, charged with identifying eight critical elements most important to promoting positive youth outcomes in youth development programming (Kress, 2014). The results, based on a literature review of youth development research and a survey conducted of over 2,400 youth ages 5-19 in eight states identified the following elements (Kress, 2014):

1. A positive relationship with a caring adult;
2. A physically and emotionally safe environment;
3. The opportunity to value and practice service for others;
4. An opportunity for self-determination;
5. An inclusive environment;
6. An opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future;
7. Engagement in learning;
8. Opportunity for Mastery

Shortly after the publication of the National 4-H Impact Assessment Project report, Kress – who would later become the national program leader for 4-H – synthesized the eight critical elements of the task force report with the four elements from the Circle of Courage model (see Figure 1), resulting in the *Essential Elements* of 4-H (Brendtro, Van Bockern, & Clemenston, 1995; Kress, 2014; Rennekamp, 2014).

Figure 2. Combining the Circle of Courage and the Essential Elements of 4-H



Source: Kress, C. (2004) Essential Elements of 4-H Youth Development. National 4-H Headquarters, CSREES UDSA, **www.national4-hheadquarters.gov/library/Essential_Element-Satellite.ppt**

The Five Cs

In 2005, Lerner transformed the discussion of PYD with the *4-H Study of Positive Youth Development.* Though this study is attributed to Lerner et al. (2005), it was actually conducted in partnership between Tufts University's Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development, led by Lerner, and the National 4-H Council. The National 4-H Council funded the study, recognizing the need for a stronger grounding of 4-H practice in rigorous youth development research and facing growing demands from funders in a challenging economy for evidence of program effectiveness (Hamilton, 2014). Through the study the researchers sought to ascertain whether and how positive youth development occurs when adolescent individual strengths are aligned with the contexts of family, school, and community resources (particularly organized youth development programs) provided outside of school hours (Lerner et al., 2011). While it

focused on 4-H participation specifically, the study also explored a wide range of youth development issues unrelated to 4-H as well (Hamilton, 2014).

Grounded in Relational Developmental Systems Theory (Overton, 2010), the study focused on themes called the *five Cs* of positive youth development –*competence*, *confidence*, *connection*, *character*, and *caring* – that wove throughout PYD research (Lerner et al., 2005). The researchers theorized that young people whose lives incorporate these five Cs will be on a developmental path that demonstrates a sixth "C" of *contribution* to self, family, community, and society as a whole. Lerner et al. (2013) suggested that youth with high levels of these six Cs are on a positive youth development trajectory, while those whose lives contain lower amounts are at higher risk for a developmental path that included personal, social, and behavioral problems often cited in the deficit approach to youth development research.

The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development employed a wide array of analytical procedures which Hamilton (2014) claims "advanced the state of the art in research on youth development" (p. 1009). The study used self-report questionnaire data, gathered from a sample of 1,719 fifth graders (and their parents) from 13 states and 61 schools during the 2002-03 school year. The study also examined quantitative data such as participant's grades, school attendance, frequency and types of exercise, "citizenship" activities, out-of-school time, and presumably documentation of illegal activities. Anticipating that they would lose some participants over time for various reasons, the research team employed a longitudinal cohort sequential design by adding new cohorts of participants in subsequent waves. By the end of the seventh wave in 2008, over 7,000 participants from 44 states were represented in the study. Lerner et al. (2013) indicated

that, while they came from a variety of geographic settings and represented "a variety of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds" (p. 13), validity and generalizability of the data were primarily a result of the large sample size.

Youth Sparks

Building on a widespread recognition established in the literature that adolescents benefit from developmental nutrients experienced across multiple contexts, contemporary PYD researchers have extended the conversation further to include the concepts of intrinsic motivators, or *sparks* (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011). The term "spark" can be defined as "a passion for a self-identified interest, skill, or capacity that metaphorically lights a fire in an adolescent's life, providing energy, joy, purpose, and direction" (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010, p. 264). While this term has begun to take root in the literature, DesRoches and Willoughby (2013) note that alternate terms for essentially the same concept can also be found throughout PYD research, such as *valued activities* (DesRoches & Willoughby, 2013), *passions* (Vallerand et al., 2003), and *self-defining activities* (Coatsworth, Palen, Sharp, & Ferrer-Wreder, 2006).

The central components of the construct of sparks has been supported in the research of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Larson (2000), which have been particularly influential to contemporary PYD literature by supporting the general theory that positive youth outcomes are facilitated by motivation, quantity of time, a significant level of challenge and a high level of engagement in intrinsically motivating youth program activities. In his book *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience,* Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes *flow activities* as those which are self-chosen, engaging, pleasurable, intrinsically motivated, focused on the present, and leave the participant feeling energized

afterward (Froh et al., 2010). Larson (2000) asserts that development of *initiative*, which he defines as "the ability to be motivated from within to direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal" (p. 170), is a core component of positive youth development, and consists of three crucial elements: (1) intrinsic motivation, (2) engagement and concentration, and (3) directed towards a goal over time. In contrast to implications of the deficit model, Larson asserts that youth are "awake, alive, and open to developmental experiences in a way that is less common in other parts of their daily lives" (p. 173).

With evidence that supportive relationships and opportunities for empowerment provide the context for youth to develop and identify their sparks (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010), emerging research suggests that youth engagement in these activities is a predictor of *positive adjustment*, which includes a larger sense of purpose in life, more optimism, and higher self-esteem over time (DesRoches & Willoughby, 2013; Froh et al., 2010). Challenging this notion, Larson (2000) noted that a body of research suggesting that the reverse may be true, with more positively developed youth simply more likely to engage in these valued activities due to factors such as higher socioeconomic status, more parent support, and greater availability of organized youth programs in affluent neighborhoods (Larson, 2000). DesRoches and Willoughby (2013) offer evidence to refute this assertion, however, noting that the sample population (i.e., high-risk adolescents) can negatively impact the generalizability of the results. Further, in investigating possible a selection effect to determine if the more positively adjusted Canadian youth in their research sample were more likely to engage in valued activities, DesRoches and Willoughby found that more positively adjusted youth in their study did

not engage in these valued activities at a higher rate than those who were less positively adjusted.

Youth Thriving

An additional line of inquiry within the PYD framework focuses on adolescent thriving, which is defined in close relation to the development of sparks. As mentioned in Section I, thriving is the development of attributes (such as the 5 Cs above) that reflect a flourishing, healthy young person who actively contributes to enrich one's self, family, community and society as a whole (Lerner et al., 2009). A mutually influential, positive, and bidirectional relationship between individual and context is fundamental to the process of thriving (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2012). Other factors that are tremendously important to this process include intrinsic motivation, quantity of time, a significant level of challenge and level of engagement in youth program activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Larson, 2000) such as 4-H.

In contemporary PYD research, thriving is often studied in conjunction with the concept of sparks, as described above. Positive youth development programs engage youth in activities aligned with their sparks. These activities are described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as *flow activities,* which are self-chosen, engaging, pleasurable, intrinsically motivated, focused on the present, and leave the participant feeling energized afterward (Froh et al., 2010). The identification, accumulation, and nurturing of sparks over time contribute to thriving, with these opportunities most often realized through significant relationships (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). Within the 4-H program, the presence of caring adults (and other youth) within the 4-H club constitutes an important measure of these significant relationships, and experiences over time

provide the opportunity for these relationships to take root. Smaller and more specialized groups, such as a state 4-H council, offer enhanced opportunities for building strong, close-knit relationships, through sharing of unique experiences. Missouri's State 4-H Council members self-select committee responsibilities, have opportunities to design workshops they will teach around their own interests, and must work to maintain their status as member of the group through participation and contribution over the course of the Council year.

Research into the types of youth program activities associated with these relationships reveal additional variables important to the process of thriving. These include *intrinsic motivation*, *quantity of time*, *level of engagement,* and whether there is a significant *level of challenge* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Larson, 2000). These aspects of thriving align well with the design of traditional 4-H programs in general, and with the state 4-H council model in particular. Because membership on the State 4-H Council occurs through a competitive election process, those who serve tend to come with high levels of individual initiative. Larson (2000) maintains that this quality is a core component of positive youth development, and consists of three crucial elements: (1) intrinsic motivation, (2) engagement and concentration, and (3) directed towards a goal over time. These elements are built into the organizational fabric of the State 4-H Council, as members work over the course of several months to construct interesting programs for younger 4-H members which reflect their interests and meet goals that they themselves identify.

4-H Youth Development Programing as Positive Youth Development

As the body of PYD research has continued to grow, several areas of alignment with 4-H programming have emerged. For example, Lerner et al. (2011) note that stronger levels of interpersonal communication between youth and adults – a hallmark of 4-H programming in general – has been found to be predictive of greater amounts of civic duty, civic efficacy, neighborhood social connection, and civic participation. In addition to these relational opportunities, Scales, Benson, and Roehlkepartain (2010) found that a sense of empowerment and engagement with activities of deep interest were also strongly associated with community engagement and contribution, asserting that the accumulation of these three strengths was a stronger predictor of youth development outcomes among adolescents than even race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). A growing body of research identifies additional youth program activity contexts, which contribute to positive youth development outcomes, such as opportunities for planning and taking initiative, parental support, positive peer groups, and positive adult role models (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2012).

Results from the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development provided evidence that "4-H youth are thriving across substantial portions of their adolescence," with 4-H participants scoring higher than their peers in other out-of-school programs "consistently across time, and in different configurations of samples" (Lerner et al., 2013, p. 39). 4-H youth in the study had higher levels of contribution in their various contexts (nearly four times), when compared to their non-4-H peers. They were nearly twice as likely to be civically active, make healthier choices, and to participate in science programs. In addition, 4-H girls were twice as likely in grade 10 and three times more likely in grade

12 to take part in science programs. Finally, 4-H youth were significantly more likely than their non-4-H counterparts to have better grades, engage in more leadership roles, and go to college (Lerner et al., 2013).

While Lerner et al.'s (2013) study has been the most robust to date, prior research also indicates that 4-H experience has a stronger developmental impact in a variety of outcomes areas than that of other major youth serving organizations. These areas include public speaking skills, community volunteerism, civic engagement, civic identity, self-discipline, self-responsibility, and teamwork (Lerner et al., 2005; Maass, Wilken, Jordan, Culen, & Place, 2006). Bruce, Boyd, and Dooley (2004) found that 4-H alumni credited their 4-H experience as key to their development of communication, decision-making, understanding of how groups function, as well as their understanding of themselves.

SUMMARY

Through this literature review, I have sought to describe a significant shift in the scholarly approach to adolescent development research, detail the roots and components of the emerging Positive Youth Development Theory, and establish why it provides an effective theoretical framework for 4-H programming on the national and local levels. In practice, as youth participate in 4-H clubs and service learning projects in communities across the nation, the infusion of the 4-H essential elements in these programs create learning environments that provide established developmental nutrients. Examples of this are inclusion in group activities (belonging), safe environments in which to explore (independence), experiences with prosocial activities (generosity) and opportunities for empowerment (mastery).

Over time, PYD theory suggests that these powerful youth development experiences provide opportunities for young people to identify and nurture their sparks, positively affect their life trajectories, and orient towards a thriving path (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). Most importantly, these young people learn to view themselves as difference-makers who can influence their contexts in meaningful ways, recognizing and choosing contexts with which they can establish enriching bi-directional relationships that alter their life trajectory in very positive ways.

SECTION FOUR:

CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

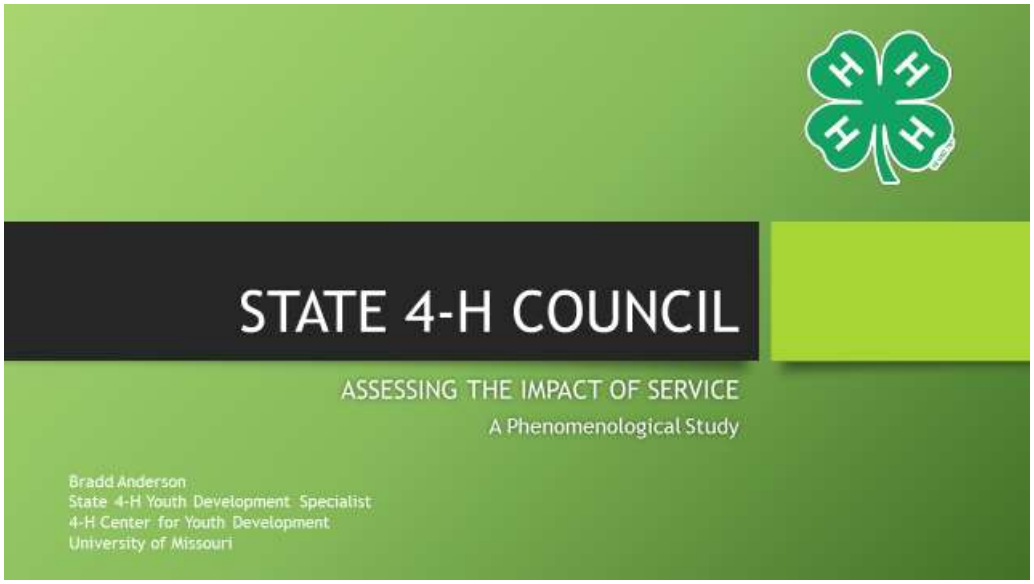
Plan for Dissemination of Scholarly Contribution

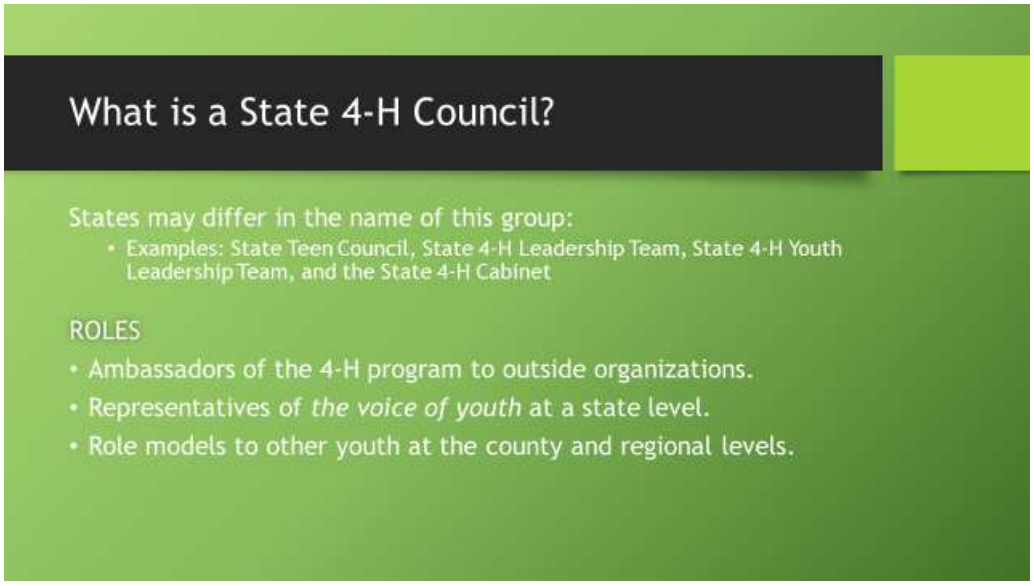
I will conduct presentations of my research findings to state and national groups of 4-H youth development colleagues through two primary venues. At the state level, I will conduct an in-service education training for Missouri 4-H youth development professionals, using the Zoom (http://zoom.us) video teleconference technology platform as needed to bridge geographic barriers in an economical manner. At the national level, I will first conduct a Zoom presentation to colleagues who serve in state 4-H council coordinator roles and then present face-to-face at the National Association of Extension 4-H Educators (NAE4-HA) Conference, October 19-22, 2020, in Boise, Idaho.

In each of these venues, I will utilize Positive Youth Development theory to frame my findings in an organizational context that offers a high degree of relevance for other state 4-H programs. I will then use my four frames analysis (Bolman & Deal, 2008) from Section II to provide an organizational context for implementing adaptive changes to current state 4-H council programs, and making recommendations for roles that state 4-H councils might play in the programmatic future of the larger 4-H organization. The symbolic role of a state 4-H council is powerful in a positive youth development organization, offering unparalleled structural supports to the organization through the linkages between public perception, elected officials and university funding. In the area of human resources, a strong state 4-H council offers a model of youth engagement that can impact both the attraction and recruitment of new professionals, who must assess their fit with Extension as they seek a place to build their career. Structural supports, particularly funding, should arguably be reconfigured to leverage the assets these councils represent in the most efficient manner.

Presentation Highlights

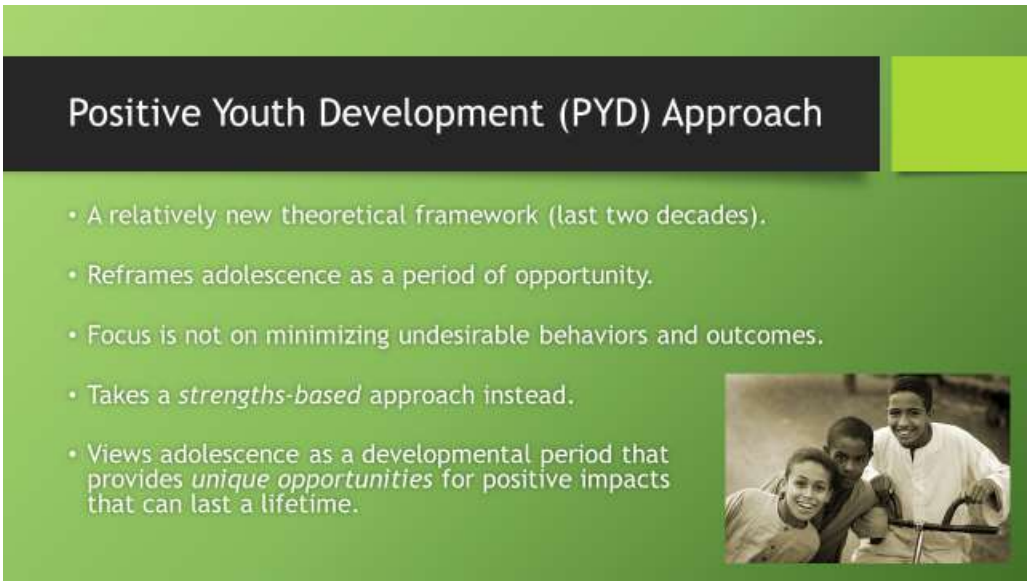
State 4-H councils are an embodiment of the youth-adult partnership model of 4-H, consisting of a body of youth formally recognized to represent the voice of 4-H members at the state level. Only a small number of studies have addressed the lasting impacts of service on a state 4-H council. This study connects the study of state 4-H council experience to contemporary Positive Youth Development theory, provides additional context for past studies, offers new insights into the potential for lasting impacts of service on a state 4-H council, and suggests new avenues for future research. It is the first study of state 4-H councils to explore the constructs of race and culture, and the first of these studies to formally utilize a phenomenological approach as an avenue of inquiry. The term *State 4-H Council* will be capitalized when referring to the Missouri council and non-capitalized when referring to state 4-H councils in general.





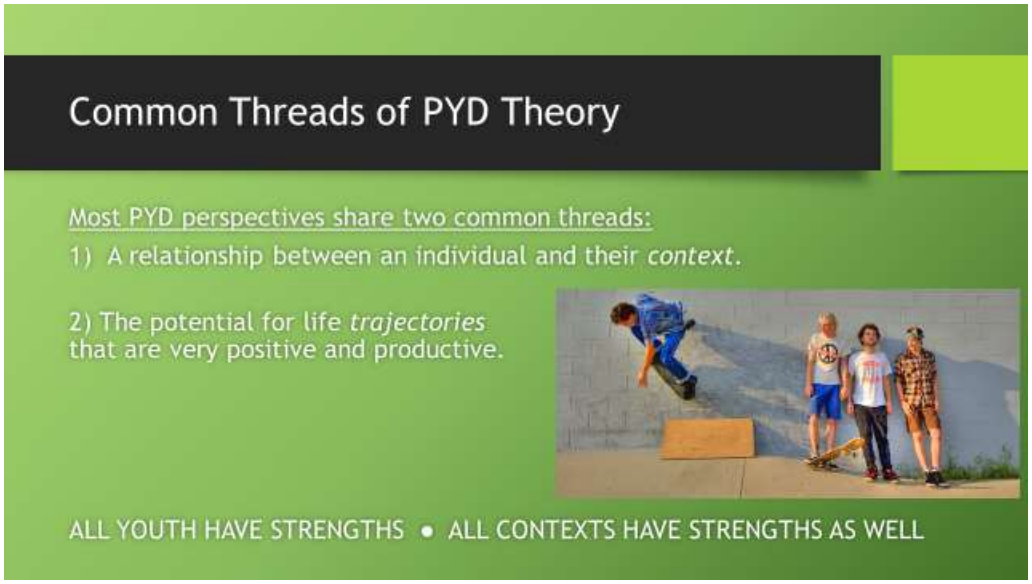
State 4-H Councils are a traditional part of many state 4-H programs within the continental United States. They may go by various names, but their duties are remarkably similar. Members of these councils are ambassadors of 4-H, provide a youth voice to the state 4-H program, and serve as valuable role models for younger 4-H'ers. They are formally recognized by the state 4-H program and often elected by their peers. The purpose of this study was to explore the essence of this experience, learning how it impacted the lives of alumni.

The structure of Missouri's State 4-H Council is made up of regional representatives and an executive committee. Each region of MU Extension currently receives four representatives, which are elected at the annual State 4-H Congress. The executive committee is comprised of both candidates who ran for each officer role – secretary, treasurer, vice-president, and president – at State 4-H Congress, with those who did not win the office becoming state representatives. Each has a specific leadership role on the executive committee.



Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory is a relatively new theoretical framework that has arisen over the last two decades. PYD theory takes a strengths-based approach and reframes adolescence as a period of opportunity, rather than simply a time to focus on minimizing undesirable behaviors and outcomes. Through PYD theory, we view adolescence as a period that provides unique opportunities for positive impacts that can last a lifetime. It takes the position that all youth have potential strengths and all contexts have potential strengths as well.

PYD theory is an umbrella, covering many perspectives and approaches. Lerner et al. (2013) note that during the years of its development, the PYD framework has been described by

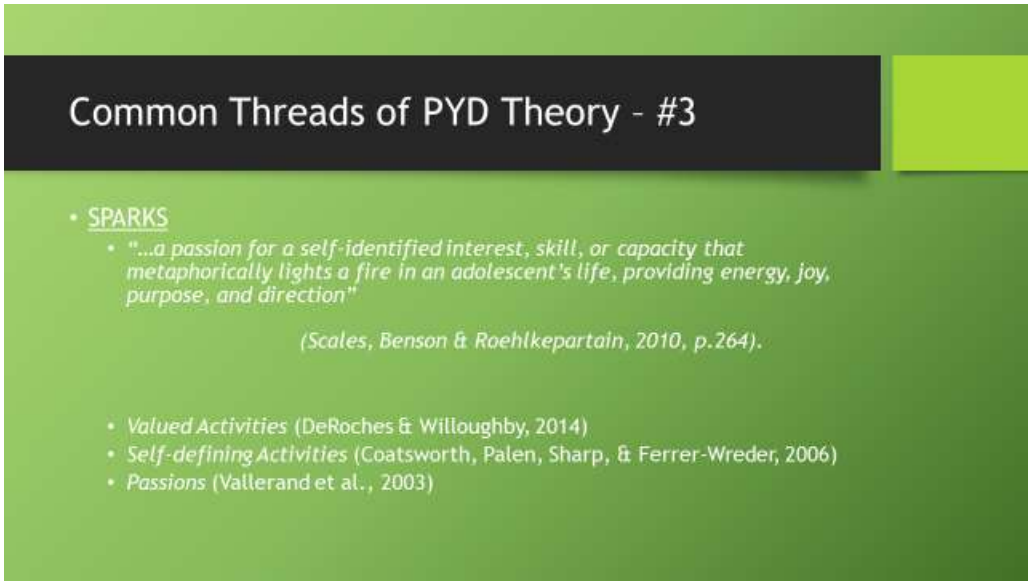


practitioners as a developmental process, a philosophical approach to youth programming, and a descriptor for the work of youth development professionals and organizations.

Most PYD perspectives share two common threads: (1) a relationship between an individual and their context, and (2) the potential for life trajectories that are very positive

and productive. When the individual-context relationship is bi-directional and the association is mutually beneficial, the relationship is said to be *adaptive.* Life trajectories are not fixed, but influenced by these constantly changing individual-contexts relationships. As Lerner (2005) states, the influence of strong relationships can last across the lifespan, when people develop in the *context of communities,* that are rich in assets, and aligned with their strengths.

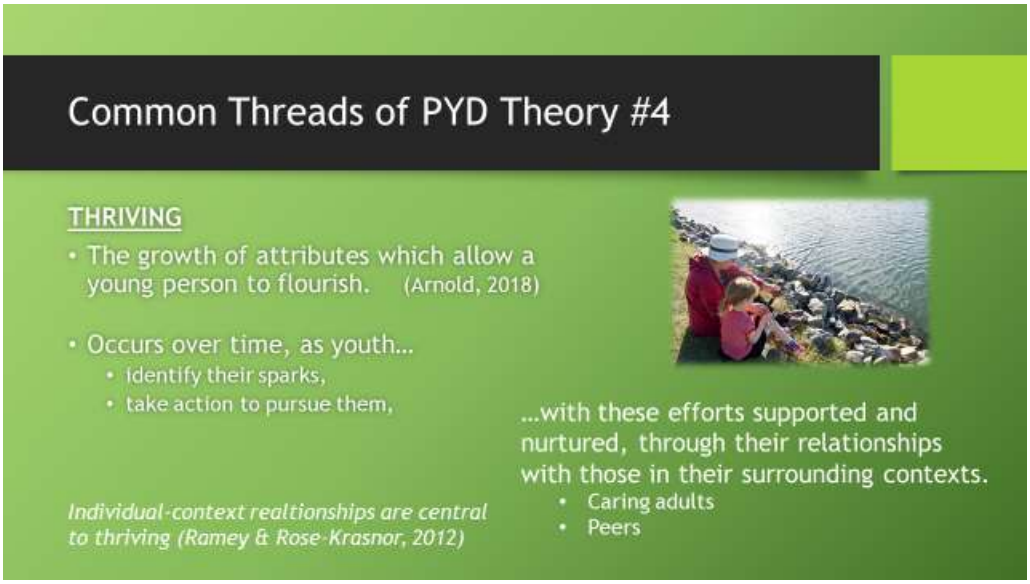
The 4-H experience provides a sense of community through relationships with caring adults who volunteer to lead clubs, projects, and other developmental experiences. These adults are screened with thorough background checks and trained in basic principles of youth development. The 4-H experience also emphasizes engagement with the larger community, as youth volunteer and conduct service learning projects in their neighborhoods and towns. To see how the 4-H experience aligns with individual strengths we will discuss the concept of sparks.



Another PYD construct important to this study is the concept of *sparks*, which are those passions and interests that teens discover that bring them things like joy, energy,

purpose, and direction. The 4-H experience encourages the exploration of sparks through its various delivery modes, such as project work, afterschool activities, and special interest clubs.

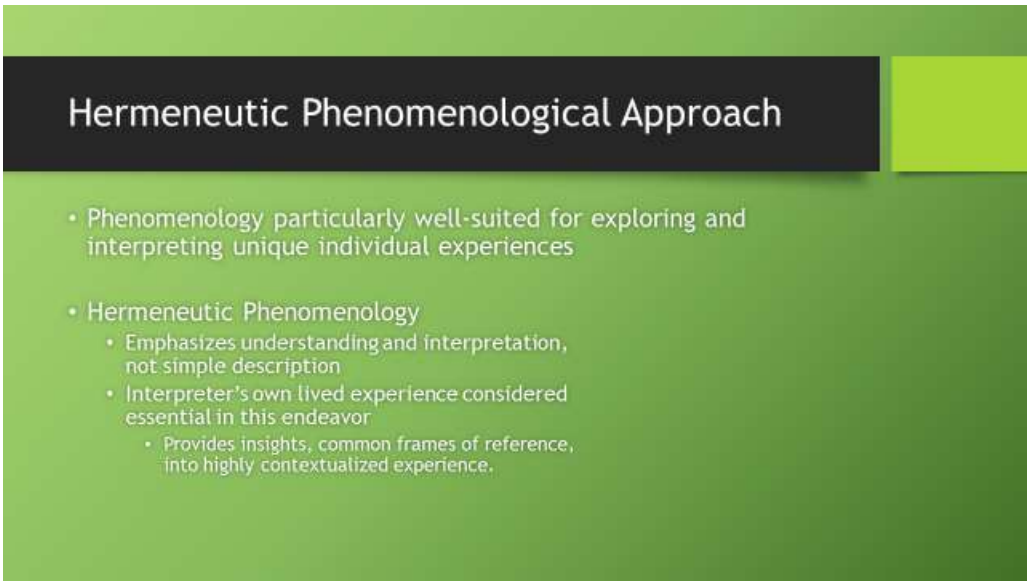
Over time, a 4-H experience and supportive relationships can bring opportunities for youth to identify and develop their sparks, as well as opportunities for empowerment (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). Current and emerging research suggests that youth engagement in these spark activities is a predictor of positive adjustment, which includes a larger sense of purpose in life, more optimism, and higher self-esteem over time (DesRoches & Willoughby, 2013; Froh et al., 2010).



As youth identify their sparks and take action to pursue them, the 4-H model intends that these efforts are supported and nurtured through relationships with those in their surrounding contexts. Over time, this can result in the growth of attributes that allow a young person to flourish (Arnold, 2018). When this happen, youth are said to be *thriving.* Individual-context relationships are central to the process of thriving (Ramey &

Rose-Krasnor, 2012), and we know that human relationships have multiple layers and are often in a dynamic state of change.

The sample for this study were 15 alumni of Missouri's State 4-H Council. They served sometime between the years of 2011 and 2013. Members of the sample were in their mid-twenties and hailed from rural Missouri, small towns, metropolitan suburbs, and large cities. The impact of 4-H experience on college-aged alumni has been largely unstudied (Anderson, Bruce & Mouton, 2010). At the time of the study, six members of the sample were university students exclusively, six were working full time in their chosen career, and three were engaged in their career while taking university classes to complete their Master's Degrees. Seven members of the sample were male and eight were female. One male and one female member of the sample are African-American and 13 are White.



The method of inquiry for this study was hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenology in general is well-suited for exploring experiences that are individual and unique, such as a state 4-H council. It is important to note distinction between hermeneutic phenomenology – developed during the 1930s by Martin Heidegger – and the original Husserlian phenomenological approach developed in the early 1900s by Edmund Husserl. Husserl's approach strove for detachment, and *bracketing of prior assumptions* in order to *uncover truth* as objectively as possible. Conversely, Hermeneutic phenomenologists largely consider this idea that one can bracket their assumptions to be absurd. Instead, Heidegger's hermeneutic approach strives to interpret the experience of participants, not just describe them, and it enlists the understandings of the researcher in the data collection process. The experience of being a State 4-H Council member is highly contextual, and my experience as a practitioner-researcher's over time added value in the process of understanding the State 4-H Council experience.

While my role as researcher and practitioner brings advantages, it also brings potential concerns. For example, as someone invested in this work I might be more

inclined to interpret the data in a biased manner, use it to gain political leverage, or be unreceptive to new insights that the data reveal (Anderson, 1999). The checks against this are found in the *methods of trustworthiness* employed in this study. Trustworthiness means the extent to which one should pay attention to the results. Methods of trustworthiness include a process of self-reflection built into the data collection procedures, and a reflective journal that chronicled ways in which my position and experience might be affecting how I received and interpreted the data. These reflective methods are commonly accepted approaches for establishing trustworthiness in phenomenological research, and serve to aid in transparency.

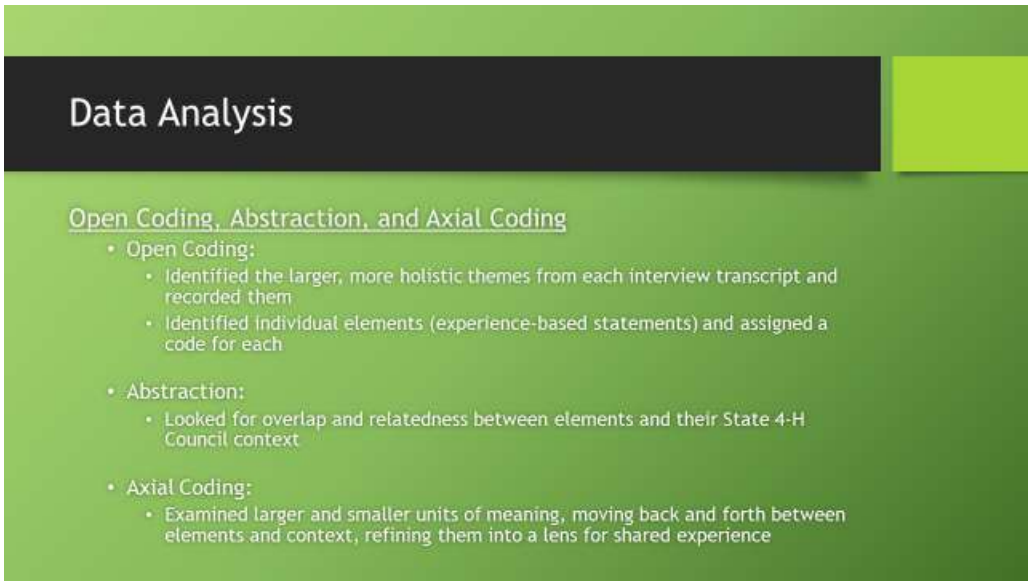
Four research questions guided this study and provided a direction for semi-structured interviews with the sample. These questions arose from three specific areas that I explored from a positive youth development approach. Looking at the data through a framework of sparks and individual-context relationships, I explored three specific

areas of the State 4-H Council experience: Social Embeddedness, Leadership Empowerment, and Thriving.

The first area, social embeddedness, was actually an economic behavior theory, formulated by sociologist Mark Granovetter in 1985 to describe the relationship between people's economic behavior and their social relationships. Granovetter (1985) maintained that our actions are strongly influenced by the people we closely interact with and the normative assumptions we share. He said these relationships influence our actions by building trust and discouraging behavior that is bad for the group. For the purposes of this study, social embeddedness refers to the strong, positive relationships that people make when they serve on the State 4-H Council. That includes expected standards of behavior, goals they share, how they keep themselves in check, and understanding who they are relation to the rest of Council.

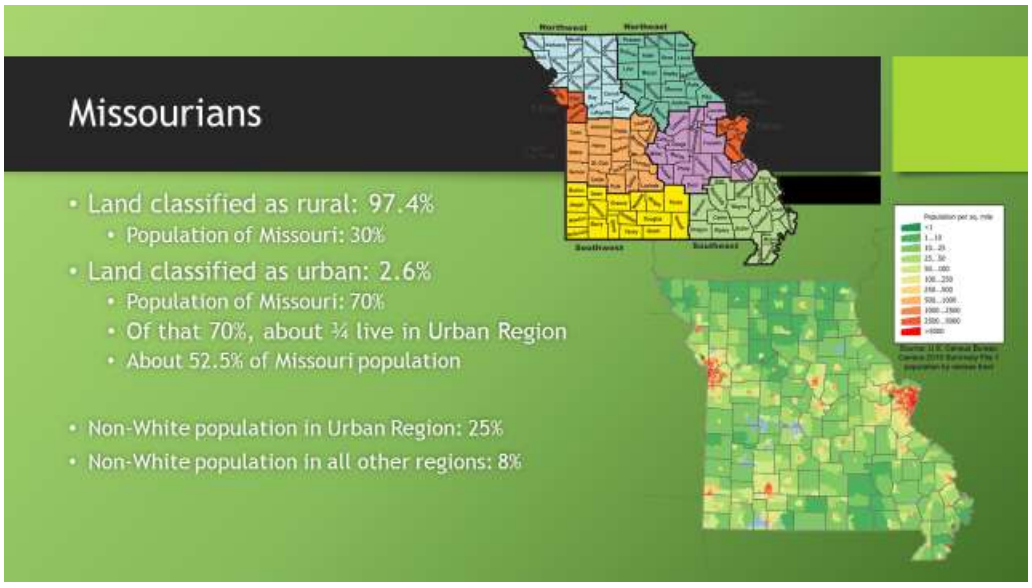
The sample was identified through a purposive sampling technique, with the practitioner-researcher reaching out to individuals who had served on Missouri's State 4-H Council sometime within the 2010-2013 timeframe. Individual interviews were arranged and conducted with each member of the sample. Preceding each interview was a preparation phase, in which I reviewed records, photos, and other artifacts pertaining to the subject's relationship with State 4-H Council.

I made research notes as the interview progressed and recorded these thoughts in a reflective journal after the interview was completed. As mentioned earlier, this reflective journal is a piece of the methods of trustworthiness that aid in transparency and chronicle ways in which my position and experience might be affecting how I received and interpreted the data.



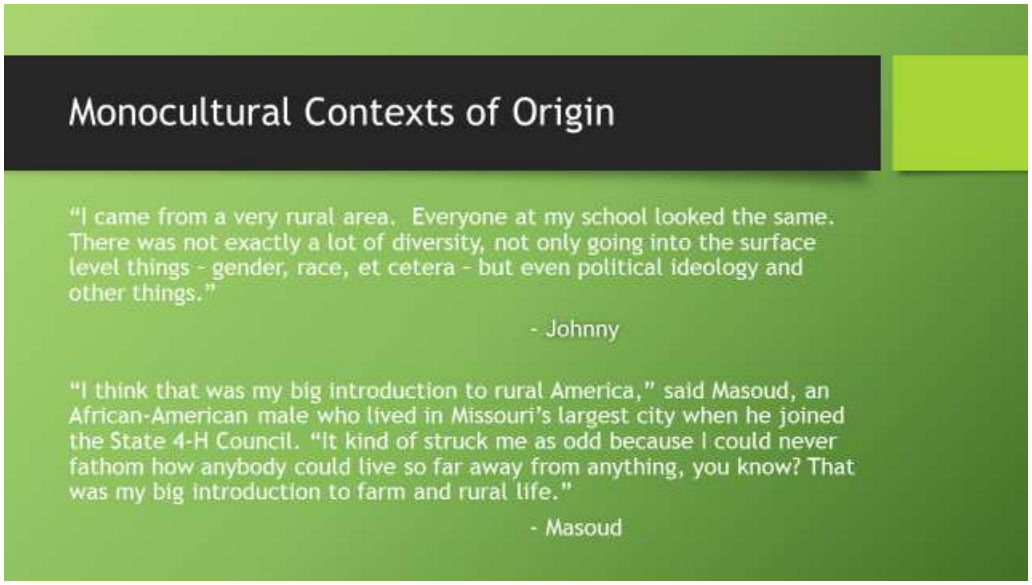
Findings from this type of phenomenological research arise from the hermeneutic process of open coding, abstraction, and axial coding techniques. The data are examined and coded to identify individual elements. These elements are then reviewed for overlap and relatedness within the context of the practitioner-researcher's knowledge and experience. This process provides a lens for interpretation of shared understandings and experience. Themes of the data emerge through this process, which eventually inform the research questions.

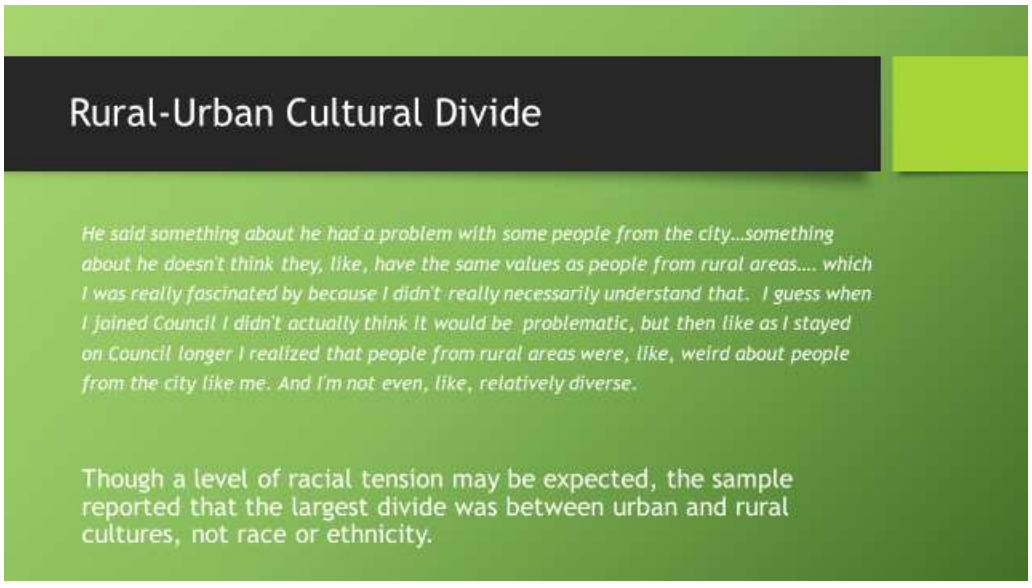
The State 4-H Council was often the first opportunity members had experienced to work closely alongside peers of different races and ethnicities. However, the urban-rural divide was viewed as larger than any racial and ethnic divide, according to the sample. This was true for both White rural youth and Black urban youth. The sample shared that most members were excited about this, but some they knew felt trepidation at first.



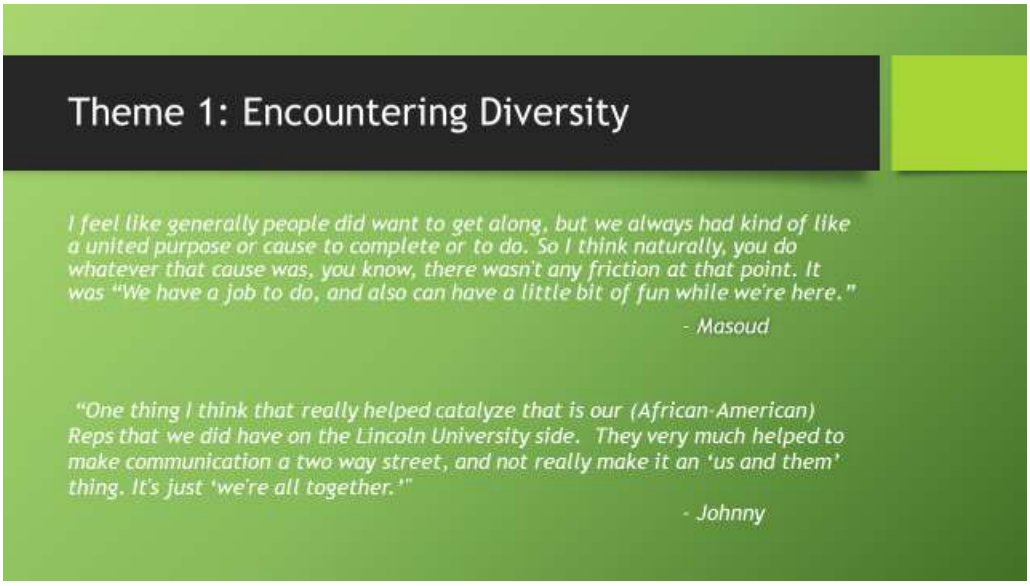
Missouri's State 4-H Council is comprised of four representatives elected from

each region. Until 2019, both urban areas were considered by MU Extension to be one region. With the demographics of Missouri, this meant that only one in four representatives were likely to be non-White. Fortunately, Lincoln University (1860 Land Grant University) had up to five reps at any given time. For Black and White youth alike, there was often limited multi-cultural experience for they began serving on the State 4-H Council.



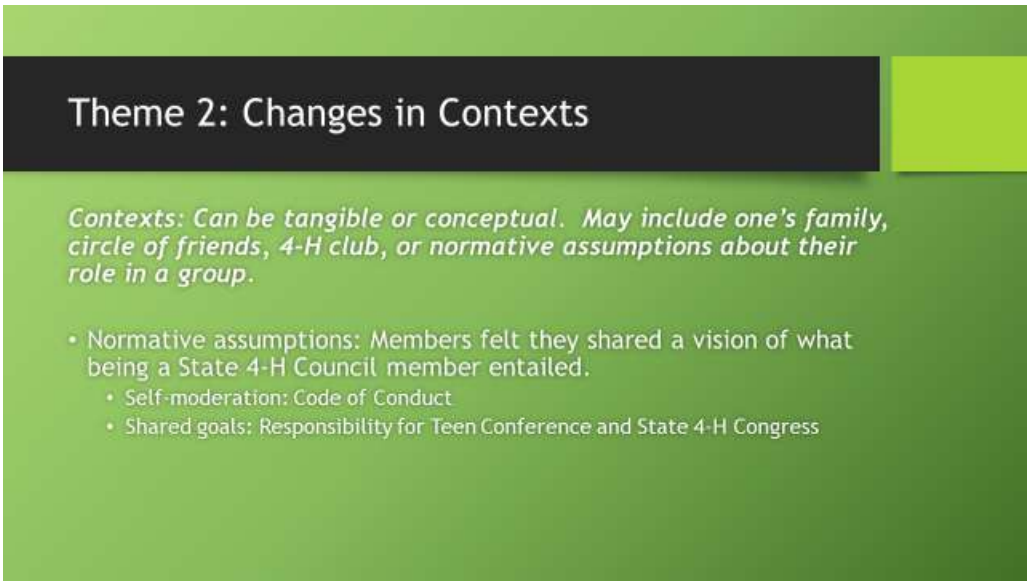


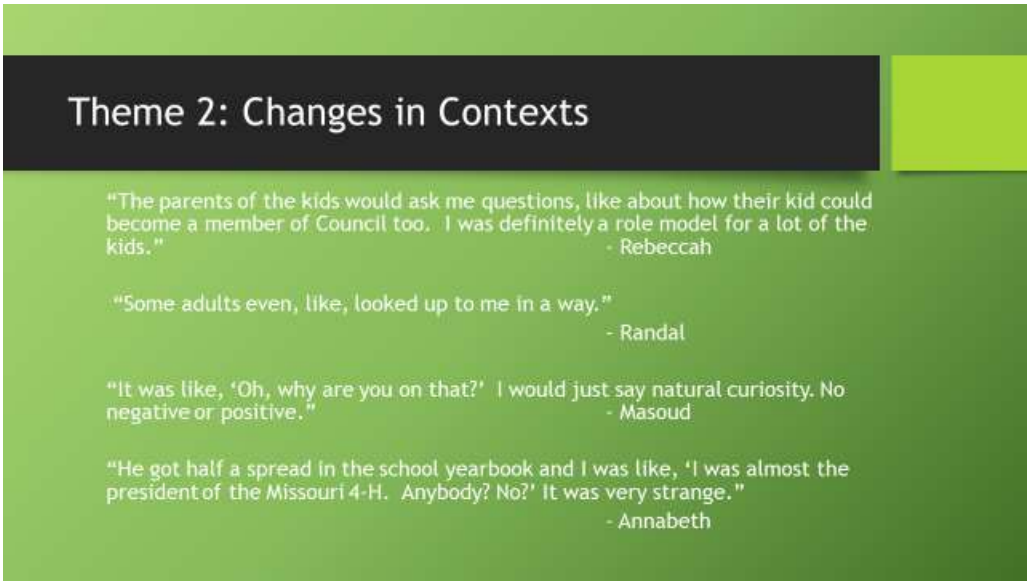
Though a level of racial tension may be expected, the sample reported that the largest divide was between urban and rural cultures, not race or ethnicity.



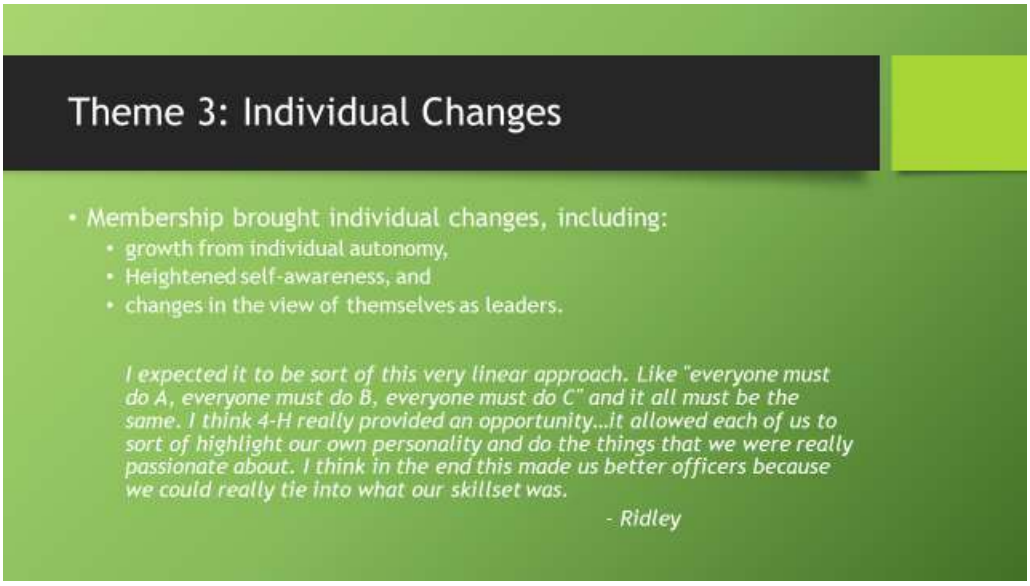
The sample reported two primary keys to success in building cultural competencies:

1) The African-American Council members from Lincoln University. These members were often proactive leaders in establishing relationships and two-way communication.
2) The other key to success was shared responsibilities in specific tasks over time as members worked in committees to design and implement key statewide 4-H events.



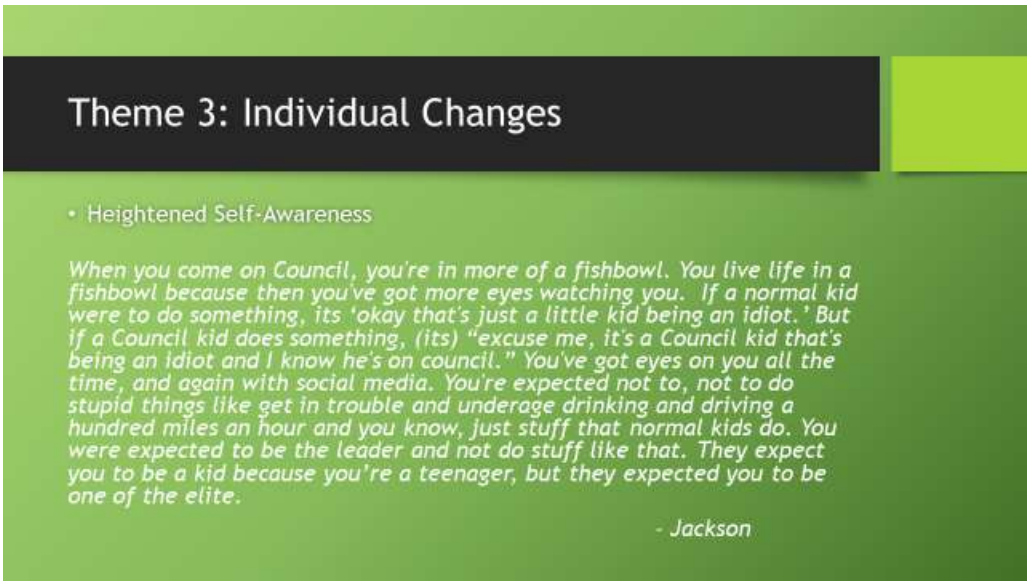


Members found that becoming a member of the State 4-H Council led to a sense of shared vision among themselves and often changes in how they were viewed in their surrounding contexts. In contexts where there was a high level of 4-H "dosage," members reported they received validation from adults and recognition from peers. In contexts with low 4-H dosage, their involvement with State 4-H Council was often met with curiosity or indifference.

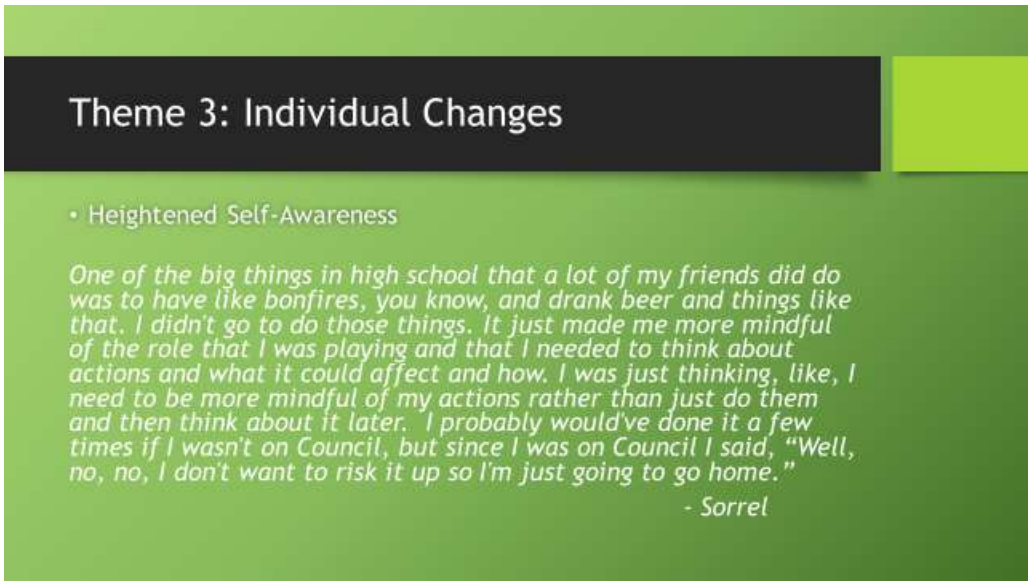


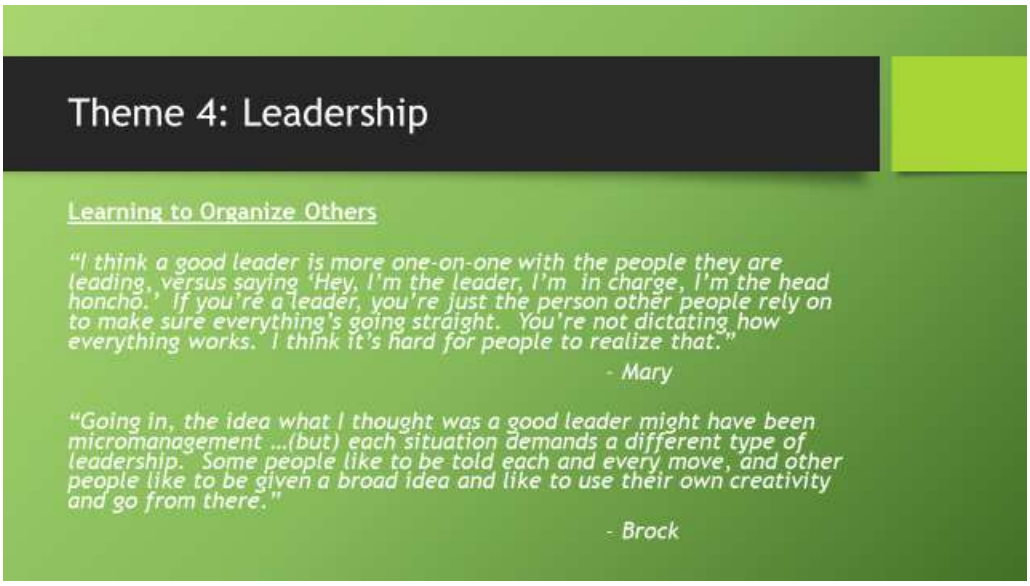
Membership on the State 4-H Council brought individual changes as well, including growth from individual autonomy, a heightened awareness of their own choices and actions, and a changing view of themselves as leaders. Within the parameters of conduct rules and policies, members felt they had the autonomy to create their role themselves and define their own approach to their job duties. “You do you” was a theme within the group, and everyone approached their duties differently.

Theme 3: Individual Changes
• Despite a sense of shared vision, each member described their role differently:
"…someone closer to the youth that are attending different events, and in different programs someone at the state level that they are more relatable to."
"I think we were there to get everyone excited, to keep everyone interested. We brought ideas to the table.
"Our role was to be a role model to Missouri 4-H'ers everywhere."
"Each of us had a different role really, because it was ours to create."
- Ridley

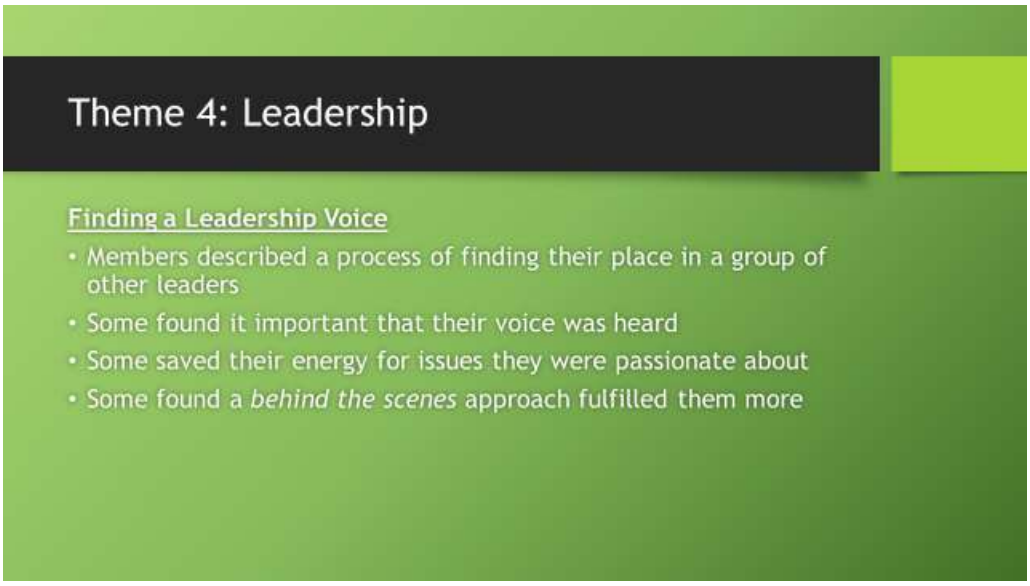


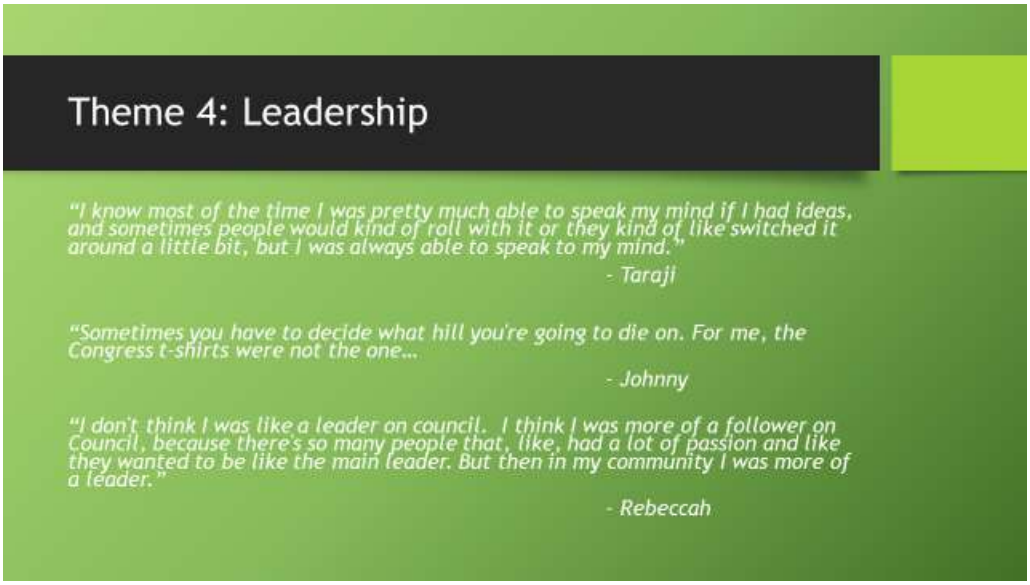
The members of the sample shared that the responsibilities of membership brought a heightened self-awareness that impacted individual actions back in their home communities. This was true among Council members with high dosages of 4-H in their communities of context, as well as for those whose contexts had low levels of 4-H influence. State 4-H Council members were acutely aware that they were seen as the standard-bearers and ambassadors of Missouri 4-H, and they embraced the role. They were mindful and discreet in their conduct.





As Council members gained experience, their understandings of leadership changed significantly. The development of specific leadership abilities was a strong theme among all members of the sample. They communicated this theme in terms of learning to organize others, finding their own leadership voice, developing leadership strategies, and gaining experience from making decisions that had real impact. As Council members, they found that various approaches worked best for them. It may be as the vocal leader at the front of the room, the strategist who picks their times to engage, or the person who works behind the scenes.





The responsibility to take major roles in planning two state 4-H events provided opportunities to make truly impactful decisions. Teen Conference serves younger youth, ages 11-13, while State 4-H Congress involved a peer audience and the experience of running for re-election. Each event required different leadership strategies and offered unique leadership experiences. For some, the sense of ownership and experience of accomplishing big goals made Teen Conference the most valued. For others, the

excitement of leading in front of their peers and the leadership strategies that entailed provided more value.

Theme 4: Leadership

Congress and Career Preparation

"As a professional you are a lot of times the same age as your workers, or even younger, and so you have to know how to get along with them and be friendly with them, but 'don't cross that line' because you are in a leadership role. So I thought State 4-H Congress definitely taught us that, which is awesome."

- Carrie

Theme 4: Leadership

Opportunities to Make Impactful Decisions

Committees address component tasks

- Can be small (5-8 people) or large (15-20 people)

"On your committee you had to really take off and go with it…making sure everyone on our committee was working through their part of it to make sure that everything was where it needed to be was very important." *-Mary*

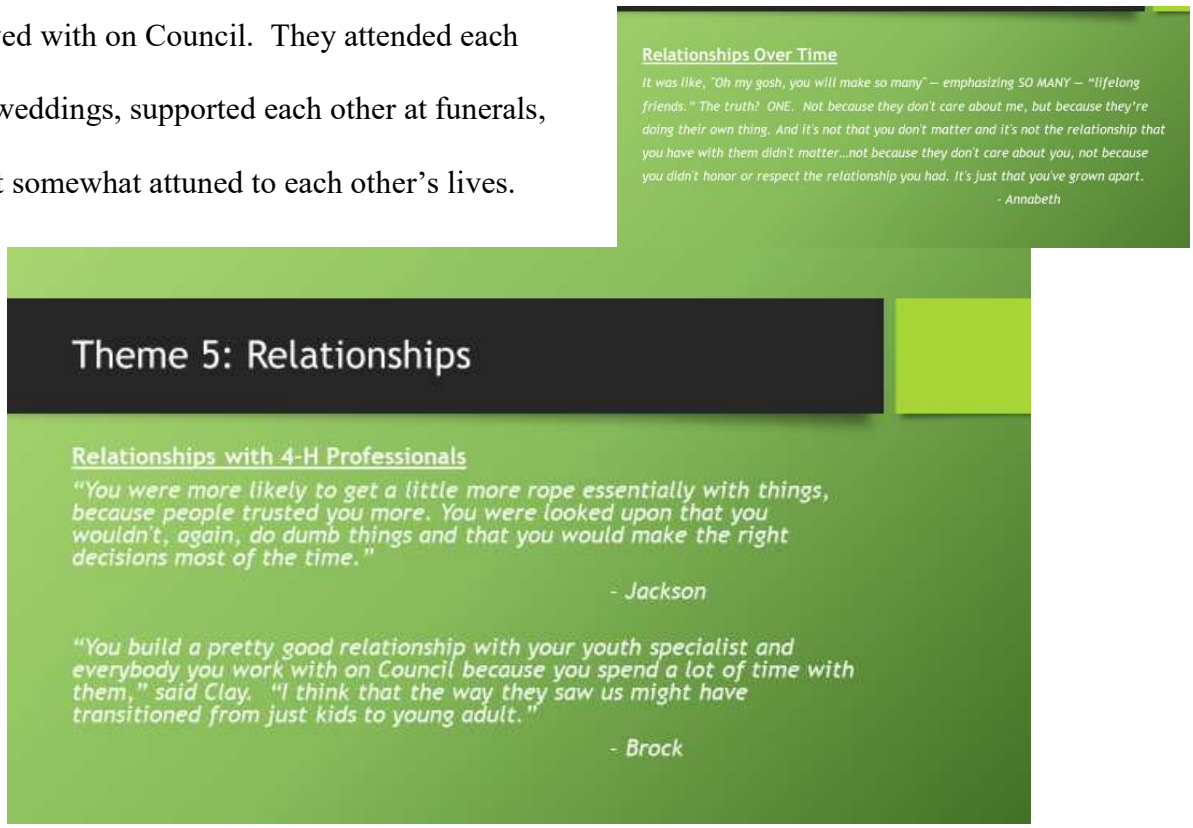
"It's not always, you know, just showing people how to lead," said Masoud, "it's leading by your actions. So I think that's one thing that stuck with me." *- Masoud*

The opportunity to make real, impactful decisions was a key source of growth for members of the sample during their State 4-H Council service. Each event required a number of committees to address each component of the event. These committees provided opportunities to work closely with diverse personalities, forge bonds, learn directly from older youth, and grow in their understandings of leadership. Committees were a key to group formation and the experience of leading state 4-H events effectively was a key to group identity.

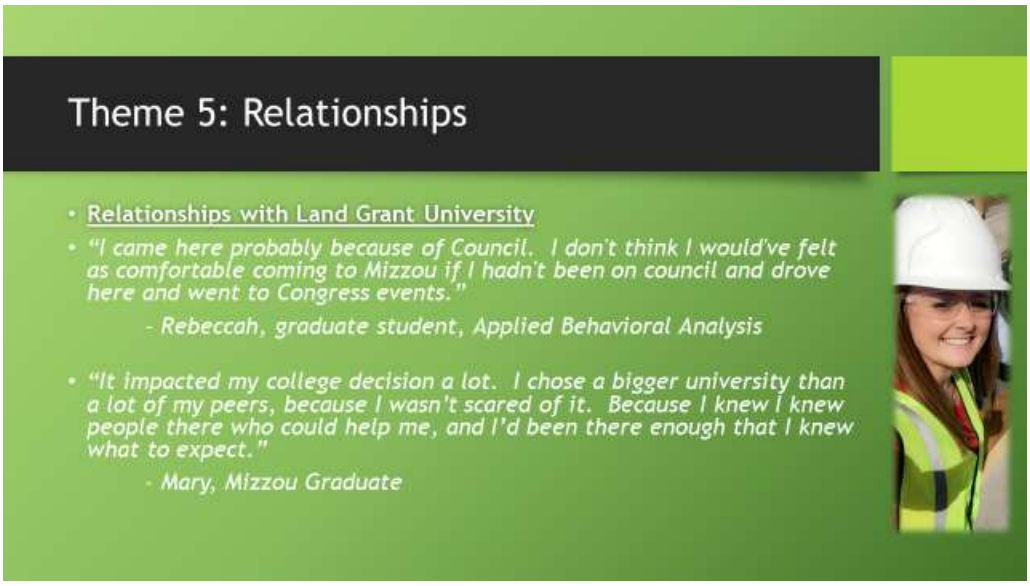
Relationships was the fifth theme derived from the data, and it resonated strongly with members of the sample. As the researchers in a 2004 study of Texas State 4-H Council members shared, "Greater than their desire to work well with one another was their desire for a close-knit group of friends" (Bruce, Boyd, & Dooley, 2004, p. 4). Close, lasting relationships were an expectation of sample members as they entered the State 4-H Council experience, and for most it was also a result of the experience.

Members referred to their State 4-H Council peers as a "family," and most expressed confidence that they could still call on their fellow alumni for help if the need ever arose. However, Annabeth's response is an important indicator that not everyone shared that same experience. While she described being close to other members at the time, she found that a sense of connection after the Council experience had largely eluded her.

All members of the sample were in regular contact with at least one person they had served with on Council. They attended each other's weddings, supported each other at funerals, and kept somewhat attuned to each other's lives.

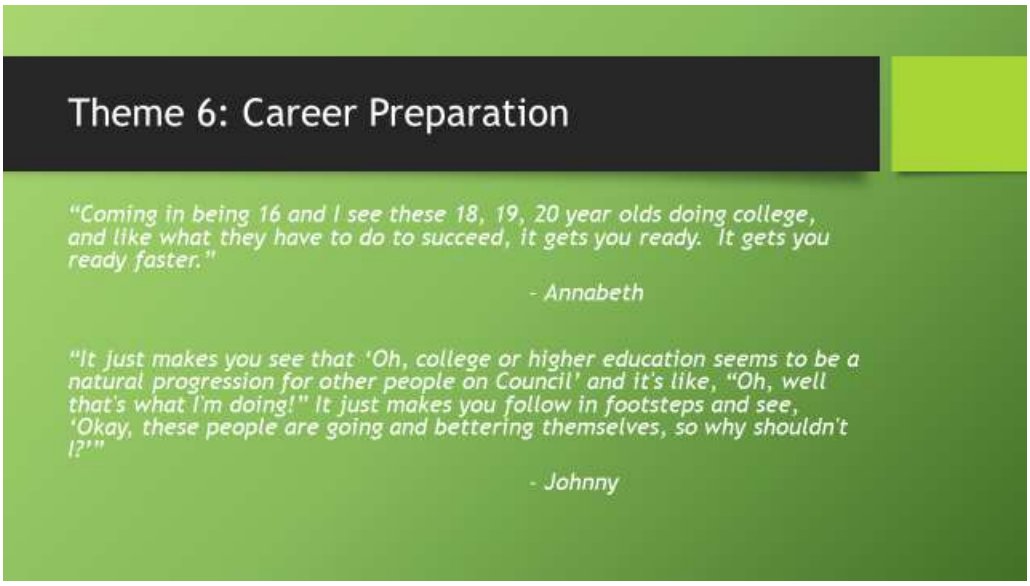


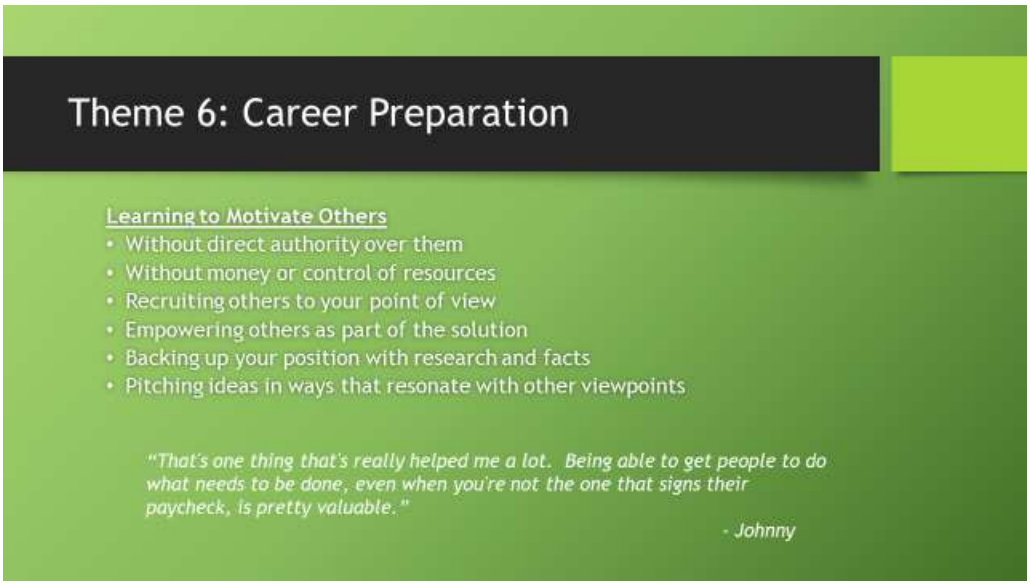
Another element of the relationships theme was the connections that grew over time with their 4-H professional, as Council members assisted with local and regional events in their leadership roles. Developmental relationships with adults are a key component of 4-H as a developmental context (Arnold, 2018), and the State 4-H Council role provided an optimal platform for nurturing stronger connection between youth and adults. Council member's work with 4-H professionals provided the benefits of youth-adult partnerships to the members themselves, but it also provided 4-H professionals the opportunities to model this key relationship for the benefit and growth of other 4-H members in their programs.



Finally, the State 4-H Council experience fostered relationships with higher education in general and the Land Grant University specifically. State 4-H Council experiences connected youth with the Land Grant University campus, establishing familiarity over time and putting it on their radar as an avenue for pursuing their larger goals. Relationships with older youth on positive life trajectories influenced younger members, opening them to new possibilities that some had not previously considered attainable.

Closely tied with leadership, career preparation was another strong theme. All members of the sample were currently on career or academic paths that satisfied them, and described the Council experience as a key influence in their preparedness to pursue careers after high school. The key elements that arose from the sample included *inspiration and direction*, *the ability to motivate others*, *experience with diversity*, *the capacity to adapt*, and *experience working in teams*. Working closely with older youth on positive life trajectories influenced younger members, opening them to new possibilities that some had not previously considered attainable.


Theme 6: Career Preparation
"Coming in being 16 and I see these 18, 19, 20 year olds doing college, and like what they have to do to succeed, it gets you ready. It gets you ready faster."
- Annabeth
"It just makes you see that 'Oh, college or higher education seems to be a natural progression for other people on Council' and it's like, "Oh, well that's what I'm doing!" It just makes you follow in footsteps and see, 'Okay, these people are going and bettering themselves, so why shouldn't I?'"
- Johnny



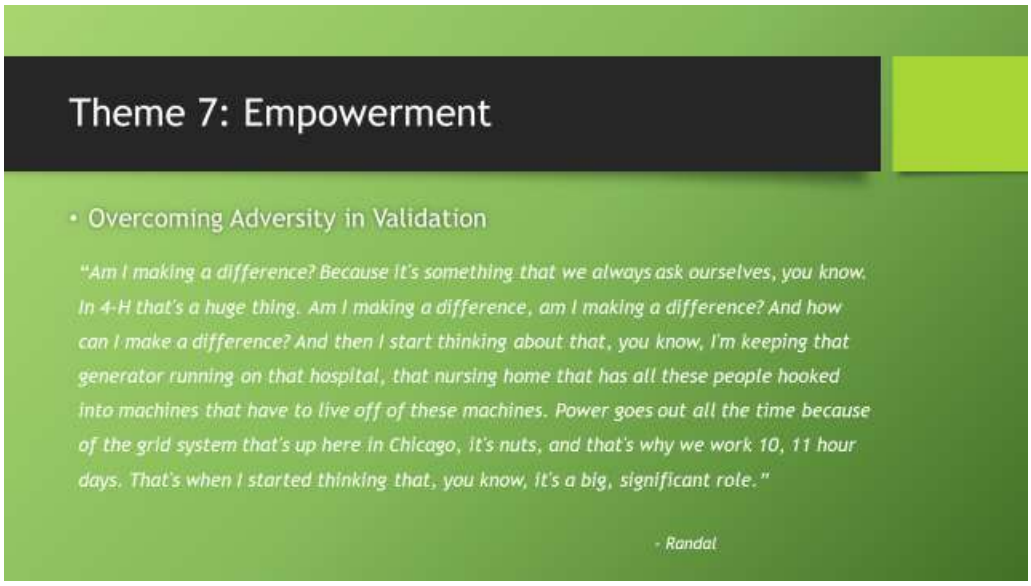
In the early stages of their careers, the sample found they had neither authority nor the ability to provide financial incentives for coworkers they had to rely on. Many noted an ability to motivate others that had developed through working in committees during their Council tenure. This allowed them to utilize their skillsets in the absence of power or control.

Experience in working with others of different races, sexual orientations, and cultures was extremely valuable to members of the sample as they entered college and forged careers. This allowed them to move towards opportunities while many of their peers struggled to adjust.

The final theme that arose involved the demonstrated ability of individuals to exert influence upon the contexts of their lives and pursue their greatest dreams and interests. This is closely intertwined with the concept of *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 2010), which is an individual's *belief* in their ability to do this. Several members of the sample identified a course and pursued it, through college or additional training, while others overcame early adversity in this pursuit.

Some found the path to success in the adult world to be more difficult than initially expected. As Mary shared, Council members faced certain realities even after earning a college degree and beginning a career. Mary's experience above suggests that as individuals transition from youth to young adulthood, more attention from 4-H programs may be warranted towards the shift in responsibility for orienting oneself towards a thriving trajectory. While assisted in this regard by caring adults throughout her 4-H career, Mary's embrace of growth opportunities through rich youth experiences –

such as service on the State 4-H Council – fostered a self-efficacy and a confidence that she would eventually engage as she assumed responsibility for her own advancement.



Some of the data suggest that the combination of self-efficacy and the view of oneself as a leader may be a complicating factor in one's pursuit of individual dreams. Randal had always loved mechanics, but as he settled into a mechanical career he found himself wrestling with expectations he had internalized through his Council role. His high levels of self-efficacy and strong sense of social responsibility led him to question whether his career was significantly meaningful. It was only after he was able to resolve any conflict between his sense of self-efficacy and his social responsibility that he found fulfillment in a career he had navigated to that aligned his sparks. This underscores the vital importance of the bidirectional individual-context relationship in the orientation towards a thriving trajectory (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011).

Giving back was an important element of the empowerment theme. Through a frame of Positive Youth Development theory, giving back is a form of empowerment that includes the ability to add value to one's contexts through their association. This reflects a study of 4-H alumni by Anderson, Bruce, and Mouton (2010), who found that a large portion of their sample stressed the point that "they still would like to give back to 4-H, because they personally have received so much from the program" (p. 43). Some members identified the desire to give back as a motivation for serving on the State 4-H Council in the first place.

Many members of the sample were engaged in careers guided by their sparks, and all credited their State 4-H Council experience as a contributor to their successful career path. Several members of the sample shared that their Council experience impacted their view of themselves as leaders, and influenced an expectation of themselves for greater levels of citizenship and volunteerism at the local level. Many members of the sample were actively involved in giving back, in ways that included such involvements as church committees, home owners associations, and service as a 4-H volunteer.

Empowerment allowed most members of the sample to act upon the influence of relationships (theme 5) in pursuing higher education. Contemporary research on the impact of 4-H has established that youth involved in 4-H are significantly more likely than their non-4-H counterparts to go to college (Lerner et al., 2013). Given the nature of State 4-H Council experience as a leadership role, as described above by the members of this sample, the link between Council experience and college attendance merits further research.

Four research questions guided this study:

1) How did membership on the State 4-H Council influence individual actions during the time of service?
2) How did State 4-H Council membership impact individual member's views of themselves?
3) In what ways did State 4-H Council experience affect member's abilities to make an impact in the contexts where they live now?
4) How did State 4-H Council experience impact individual member's abilities to pursue their greatest dreams and interests?

Through the lens of Positive Youth Development Theory, these research questions were used to explore three specific areas of the State 4-H Council experience: Social Embeddedness, Leadership Empowerment, and Thriving.

With regard to the first research question, the data suggest that Council membership did influence individual actions. The sample provided several examples of how their individual actions were impacted by their close relationships around State 4-H Council membership.

Structural elements – the Code of Conduct and event responsibilities – provided a common set of rules for all members and defined their duties. Members believed they shared a set of normative assumptions about their role.

There is ample reason to believe that these members experienced social embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985), strengthened further by a sense of belonging that aligns well with the developmental needs of adolescence. Embracing this led to a heightened sense of self awareness and mindfulness that influenced their life choices in activities and behavior.

Members' views of themselves changed through the State 4-H Council experience, influenced strongly by opportunities for individual growth and through their interaction with their contexts. They found a sense of belonging to an important group, built relationships with peers, and experienced being recognized for their accomplishments.

Through meaningful leadership experiences and the opportunities to work with diverse others to make impactful decisions, these Council members began to view themselves as leaders. They experienced actually *being* a leader themselves through impactful decision-making, and learned to find their place in a group of other leaders. Member's views of themselves were also influenced through recognition, validation, and the enhanced expectations they felt from the youth and adults in their contexts.

Leadership emerged as a primary focal point in understanding this, as unique experiences led to growth in abilities. Two common data points in the interviews were the process of planning the Teen Conference and State 4-H Congress events, which required work in committees. In this work they gained skills in forming relationships, building networks, and developing effective leadership strategies that often ran counter to their preconceptions. They also developed new abilities to motivate others and adapt leadership strategies to changing conditions.

The exposure to older youth on positive life trajectories and experience in working closely with diverse peers allowed for experiences that led to valuable career preparation. These contributed to a stronger ability to pursue jobs and goals they would not have previously thought were in reach.

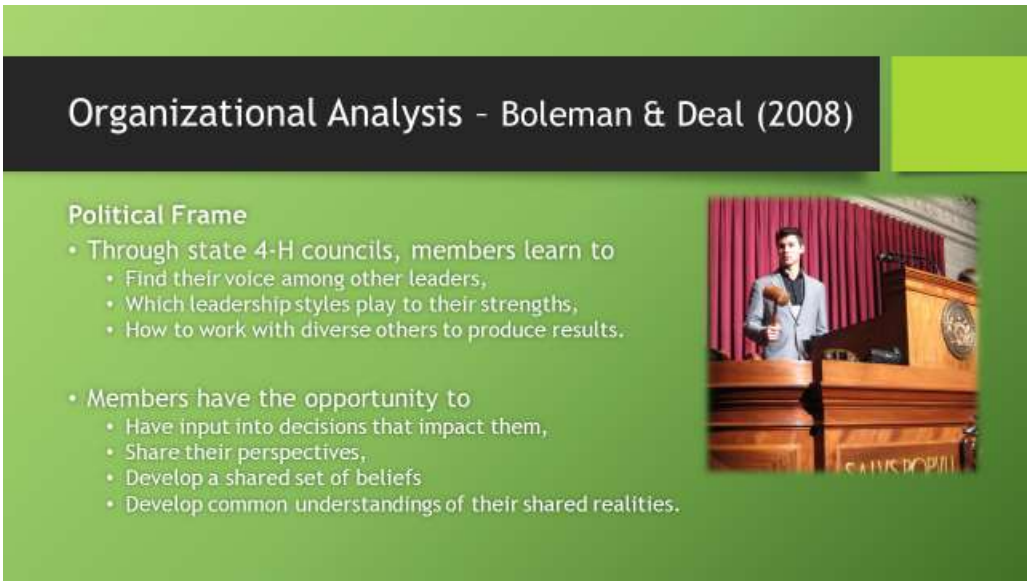
Reflecting their stage of life, this sample indicated that the most important dreams and goals they are pursuing at the present time are career-focused. The results of this study provide little indication that service on the State 4-H Council helps youth find their individual sparks. Rather, they suggest that the State 4-H Council experience strengthened members' means to pursue whatever sparks they have identified, navigate chosen courses within their thriving trajectories, and be resilient in the face of adversity. The strengths above were identified by the sample in this study as assets in career success that were developed through State 4-H Council service.

Bolman and Deal (2008) provide an approach that enhances our understanding of complex organizations. They utilize four "frames" – *structural, human resource, political,* and *symbolic* – that give us perspective into complex human organizations, and this provides a useful method for understanding the organizational context of Missouri 4-H more clearly.

The symbolic role of a state 4-H council is powerful in a positive youth development organization. State 4-H councils embody youth-adult partnerships, engagement of youth voice, and a tangible image of 4-H as an organization attuned to the interests and needs of youth. Through these symbolic dimensions, state 4-H councils can offer Land Grant Universities unparalleled assets in public perception, connections with elected officials and other drivers of university funding.

The human resources frame recognizes that individuals draw many positive benefits from their roles and associations with organizations, just as organizations rely on them to function (Bolman & Deal, 2008). As mentioned above, 4-H volunteers play a critical role in the most important aspects of program delivery, and these adults draw many benefits from the association as well.

From a human resources perspective, state 4-H councils model youth engagement in ways that impact field faculty perceptions of their profession. Alumni from this study who served on the State 4-H Council reported significant development of skills that enhanced leadership abilities, career preparation, and self-efficacy in their lives after their Council experience ended.



The political frame considers organizations to be coalitions of individuals and groups that act in their own self-interests and use their resources to serve those interests. The interests being served vary with individual beliefs, values, and understandings of reality. This frame suggests that people accrue power to accomplish these goals, and it recognizes the importance of alliances and networks. They do this through the information they have, their positions within the organization, their relationships with other individuals, and through coalitions that ultimately serve their interests (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The State 4-H Council alumni spoke to the opportunity to have input into decisions that impacted them, share their perspectives on various approaches, and develop a shared set of values, beliefs, and understandings of their shared realities with other Council members. They also learned how to motivate others when they had no power or resources they could use to persuade, enlisting them to work towards specific goals, interests, and objectives.

While the structural frame is sometimes viewed as cold and impersonal, the data show that these elements were key to the experiences that alumni valued most. The Code of Conduct provided a common set of understandings for how each member was expected to behave, creating shared expectations among diverse individuals. The process of planning and implementing a big statewide event required communication, connection, cooperation, and leadership. This provided members from monocultural backgrounds to focus on common objectives and communicate around shared goals.

Members and 4-H programs can both benefit when state 4-H councils are expected – not just allowed – to make consequential decisions as valued partners in youth development. This creates meaningful work that spurs the formation of relationships and creates developmental opportunities that lay the groundwork for leadership development and career readiness. Leadership ability, self-efficacy, and initiative (Larson, 2000) can be nurtured and grown when state 4-H council members are engaged in meaningful decision making around matters they value and given the freedom to bring their unique ideas to bear. Engaging these older youth as resources can also result in programs that better appeal to the needs and interests of the target audience.

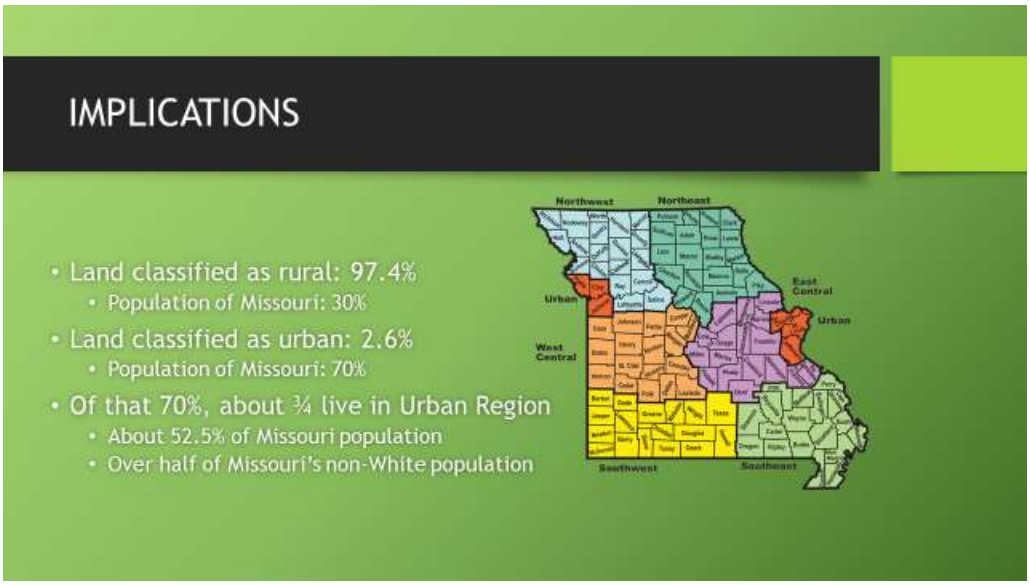
In their study of state 4-H council members in Texas, Bruce, Boyd, and Dooley (2004) emphasized the need for impactful leadership experiences. This study supports that conclusion, as the sample indicated these experiences continued to add value in their lives after Council. The tasks of planning Teen Conference and State 4-H Congress are central to the experiences of individual change members shared in encountering diversity, developing leadership, building strong relationships, and preparing for future careers.

While youth professionals may be hesitant to elevate one young person over another, there is value in the social status that comes with state 4-H council membership when it is tied to merit. This status can create a spotlight that raises expectations, increases mindfulness and self-moderation, amplifies the impacts of positive role modeling for other youth, and impacts the way members are treated by adults.

When supported in combination with a service orientation, the sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself can focus the attention of members, enhance the relationships and bonding that come from shared experience, and put other youth on a positive trajectory as they seek to emulate the older State 4-H Council members they admire. State 4-H programs should celebrate Council membership, in the context of the service-oriented work that comes with the role and the contributions that result.

Diversity in Missouri's State 4-H Council membership brought important benefits for all, as members who came to Council with limited multicultural experience transitioned into college and careers. This also provides benefits to the 4-H organization. For example, state 4-H events planned by more diverse state 4-H councils can often reflect these influences and appeal to broader range of youth.

Given the benefits that a state 4-H council can bring to members and the larger 4-H organization, it is important that state 4-H councils be representative of all of the youth in their state. In order to harness the advantages of diversity, policies governing state 4-H council membership must be equitable and accessible to all 4-H members, support a balance of urban and rural influences, be designed to foster a representative mix of racial and ethnic diversity, and provide an inclusive environment that aligns with the values of Land Grant University non-discrimination policies.



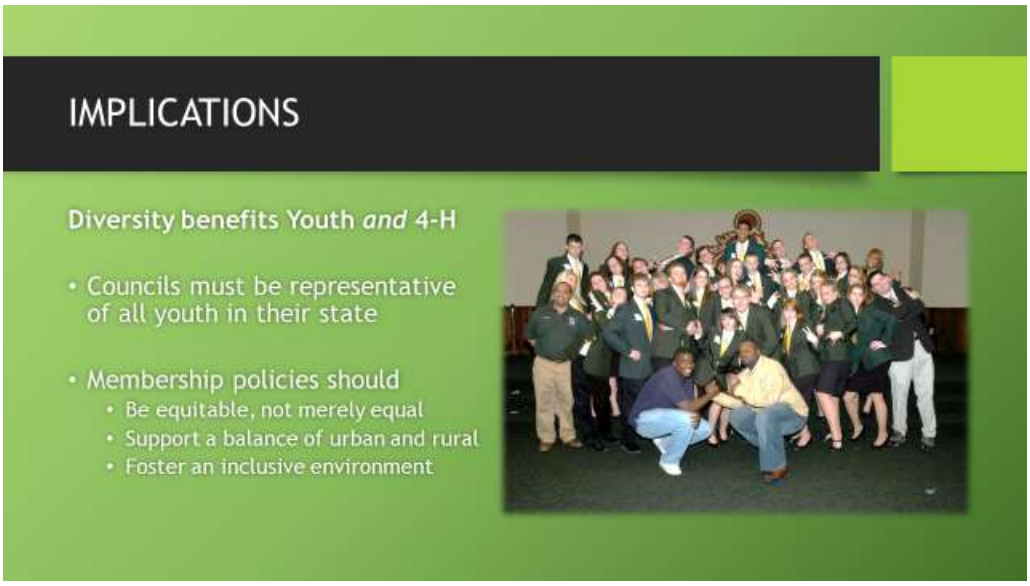
This study revealed that cultural capacity building and exposure to diversity resonated with the sample as extremely valuable aspects of their State 4-H Council experience. However, the entry path to membership on these councils can make multiculturalism a difficult task. For example, if each geographic region of a predominantly rural state is allotted an equal number of representatives to a council, the racial and cultural makeup of that council will perpetually lack diversity.

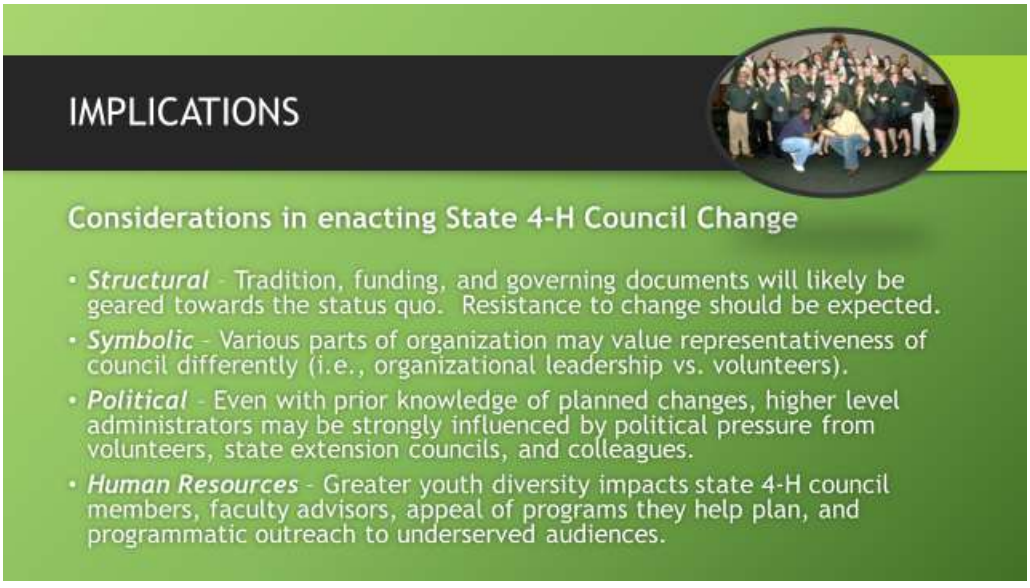
As an example, Missouri is a state in which 70% of the population live on 2.6% of the land, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The two MU Extension regions listed as urban hold a combined 52.5% of the state's population, and over half of Missouri's non-White population lives in these urban regions. Non-White Missourians make up approximately 25% of Missouri's urban population and 8% of Missouri's rural population (US Census Bureau, 2010).

The current bylaws of Missouri's State 4-H Council specify that each region may have up to four regional representatives on the council. If each geographic region of a

predominantly rural state like Missouri is allotted an equal number of representatives to a council, the racial and cultural makeup of that council will perpetually lack diversity.

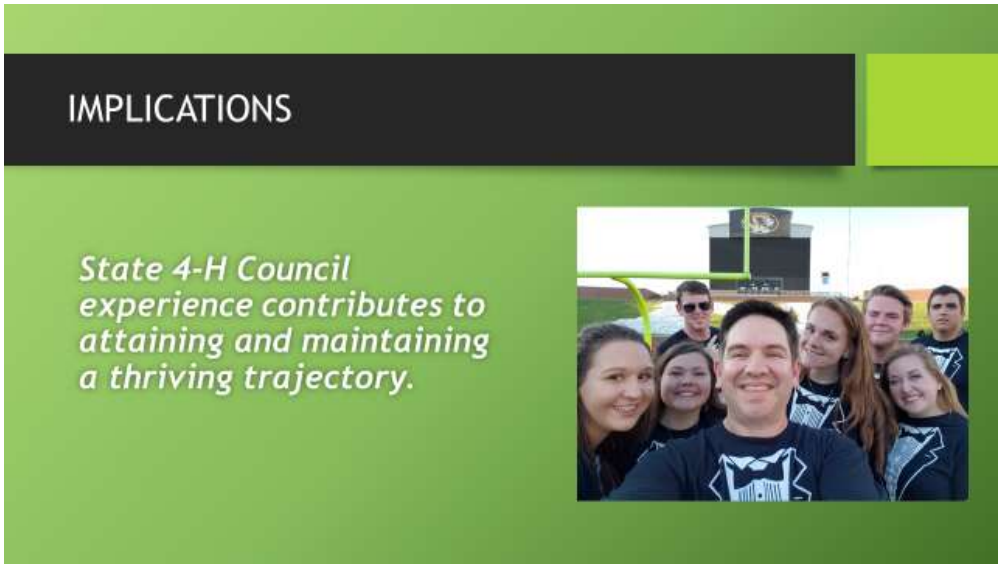
While the racial and ethnic makeup of this sample was technically representative of the State 4-H Council composition as a whole, this lack of diversity should be considered a limiting factor. As shown in the 2017 Missouri 4-H enrollment numbers, Missouri's State 4-H Council allotment of an equal number of representatives from each region currently fails to reflect the diversity of the youth population or the 4-H participation in the state. Urban youth represent the third largest group of 4-H participants, and yet ranks among the bottom in the percentage of the youth population ages 8-18 being reached by the 4-H program.





The strong positive impact of even the limited diversity experienced by the sample in this study suggest that transitioning the State 4-H Council to a more representative composition is called for. Early efforts to enact this change have yielded new organizational knowledge, which is summarized according to the four frames of Bolman and Deal (2008). Ultimately, the alignment of the human resources frame with the purpose of the 4-H organization are driving the move towards greater diversity and inclusion in Council membership policies. Organizational resistance to these changes

originates from sources tied the other three frames, but the work will continue until the transition is complete.



Arnold's (2018) 4-H Thriving Model draws on previous work by the Search Institute (2014) to emphasize intentional self-regulation, a growth mindset, connection with others, personal responsibility, pro-social orientation, openness to challenge and discovery, and goal management as indicators of a thriving trajectory. These data offer reason to infer that service on the State 4-H Council contributes to thriving, by creating a platform for particularly strong adaptive individual-context relationships, with both the Council member and 4-H (through Teen Conference, State 4-H Congress, and the Council itself) benefitting from the association.

SECTION FIVE:

CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

Target Journal

While my first instinct is to select the most prestigious journal that I think might be open to my research, reflection leads me to select the one that will have the most significant impact within my organization. For this reason, I am selecting the *Journal of Youth Development* (*JYD*), which is also geared towards scholarship contributions.

Rationale for this Target

In identifying potential journals for my research, I considered both the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence (JYA)* and the *Journal of Early Adolescence (JEA).* Neither has published scholarly research specific to 4-H since Lerner et al's (2013) 4-H study on Positive Youth Development. However, while the *JYA* is an excellent publication, it is primarily geared towards quantitative and mixed methods research, and I do not believe that my study is an appropriate fit for their scholarly focus. Conversely, while the *JEA* is a potential fit for my research approach and methodology, it is limited in scope to the study of individuals ages 10 to 14. The State 4-H Council experience generally takes place immediately after this time, from ages 15 to 18, which negatively impacts the fit between my research and the focus of this journal.

The *Journal of Youth Development* (*JYD*) is a scholarly journal that serves both researchers and practitioners, and is peer-reviewed by youth development professionals. While it does not enjoy the same level of prestige as the *JYA* and *JEA*, the *JYD* is the official journal of the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4-HA) and the National Afterschool Association (NAA). In addition to providing the most appropriate audience, this choice also supports a practical consideration that the endorsement of my

professional organization will aid me in securing a place on the schedule at the National Association of Extension 4-H Educators (NAE4-HA) Conference.

Outline of Proposed Contents for *JYD*

The JYD website (http://jyd.pitt.edu) details for submitting an article for publication. All manuscripts are submitted through an online system, and should be in APA style. Because JYD is published in an online format, the article should be adjusted accordingly. For example, paragraphs should be shorter than in a print publication, using more bulleted and numbered lists and more frequent subheadings. The article will need to be submitted in block style, with no indentions or tabs, and information in columns must be in table format.

As mentioned earlier, my article will first introduce the problem of practice and the scope of the issue, providing examples of discrepancies in actual practice among differing states. Next, I will cover methodology and the overall design of the study, followed by results, discussion, and applications for professional practice.

IMPACTS OF THE STATE 4-H COUNCIL EXPERIENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Prepared leaders can wield critical influence in the rise of cultures, the growth of human opportunity, and the lasting direction of world events. 4-H is the youth development component of Land Grant University Cooperative Extension systems and the largest youth development program in America, engaging nearly 6 million youth in the development of leadership skills and career competencies (4h.org). As an embodiment of the youth-adult partnership model of 4-H, a council of youth is often established, formally recognized, and tasked with providing input into state 4-H programs. These *state 4-H councils* are a traditional part of many state 4-H programs, and membership on such a council is commonly considered the pinnacle of a 4-H career (Bruce, 2003). Council membership is selective and commonly considered to entail an enhanced level of influence and prestige.

Among differing states these councils are sometimes referred to by other names, such as the State Teen Council, State 4-H Leadership Team, State 4-H Youth Leadership Team, and the State 4-H Cabinet (personal communications, June 30 – January 25, 2016). Regardless of specific group titles, 4-H members in these groups are commonly viewed as ambassadors of the 4-H program, representatives of the voice of youth within their organization, and role models to other youth at the county and regional levels. For the purposes of this article, the term *State 4-H Council* will be capitalized only when referring specifically to the Missouri body.

4-H is the nation's oldest and largest youth development program, but while the body of scholarly literature on the 4-H experience is growing, there is a large gap in the

research regarding service on a state 4-H council (Bruce, 2003; Leech, 2007). Despite being the pinnacle experience of a career in the nation's largest youth development program (Bruce, 2003), only three published studies (Boleman, Merten, & Hall, 2008; Bruce, Boyd, & Dooley, 2004/2005) have examined this experience specifically, all originating from within a single state context. To add to this small body of literature, the purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study is to explore the lasting impacts of service on Missouri's State 4-H Council, through the lived experience of alumni who served from 2010 to 2013.

Missouri State 4-H Council

In Missouri, the State 4-H Council experience is designed to provide an experiential leadership development opportunity aligned with the Missouri 4-H mission to engage youth as "valued, contributing members of their communities in partnership with caring adults" (4h.missouri.edu). The State 4-H Council is comprised of four regional representatives from each of the eight MU Extension regions, along with an executive committee of four officers and four state representatives. Due to the geography and demographics of the state, all but two of these regions are rural. Because of this structure, youth in Missouri who become State 4-H Council members are overwhelmingly likely to be rural, White, and monocultural. Their 4-H background is typically based in a 4-H community club model, participating in activities and meetings with a local group and exploring interests through projects led by trained volunteers.

The 4-H program in each county is overseen by County Engagement Specialists, which are university faculty members with 4-H appointments. The State 4-H Council is coordinated and guided by a 4-H faculty member based on the Land Grant University

campus, in partnership with two County Engagement Specialists and a staff member from Lincoln University, Missouri's other (1890) land grant institution. The Council works closely with these professionals in expanded leadership roles that include assisting with the design, implementation, and evaluation of the two largest state 4-H leadership development events. Other responsibilities include providing support to county and regional 4-H program events, advising on state 4-H policy issues, and serving as youth ambassadors of the 4-H program.

Underlying the State 4-H Council experience are two structural elements, (a) the Code of Conduct, and (b) event planning responsibilities for the Teen Conference and the State 4-H Congress. The Code of Conduct is an agreement signed by all State 4-H Council members at the beginning of each year, stipulating that they will abstain from illegal activities (such as alcohol and tobacco use) as a condition of membership, and uphold the standards of an ambassador of the 4-H organization. The Code of Conduct is intended to establish shared expectations and standards of behavior for all members of the State 4-H Council.

Two Missouri 4-H events determine a great deal of State 4-H Council members' work. Teen Conference is a state 4-H leadership development event for youth ages 11-13, designed to foster belonging, independence, mastery, and generosity. State 4-H Congress is a state 4-H college and career readiness event for youth ages 14-18, with a focus on experiencing college life, exploring careers, and electing the next State 4-H Council. State 4-H Council members are expected play major roles in creating the following year's Teen Conference and State 4-H Congress programs. For Teen Conference, the State 4-H Council identifies a theme, creates a vision for the event logo

and graphics, writes scripts for the assemblies, and leads workshops which they design and facilitate. While Council members do not teach workshops at State 4-H Congress, they do identify the theme and graphics, script and facilitate all assemblies, and assist with all aspects of the event. State 4-H Council is involved in the evaluation of both events, making data driven decisions for the following year based on input from attendees.

Previous Related Studies

While the pool of research focusing specifically on the state 4-H council experience is not deep, three articles provide helpful insight into the contexts of this study. These studies may serve as a de facto comparison group, with similar sample sizes and a state 4-H council that is roughly the same size as that of Missouri.

In a key study of 15 Texas 4-H alum who had served on their state 4-H council over a 13 year span, Bruce, Boyd and Dooley (2004) identified leadership and life skills that the sample reported learning through their state 4-H council experience. The researchers found that alumni reported gaining skills in decision making, communication, and working with others, while also reporting personal growth through positive relationships with council peers and self-discovery. However, the sample also expressed frustration at perceived disconnects between their initial expectations of making substantive decisions that impacted their peers and their actual experience of low level decision making around topics such as picking event themes. The researchers recommended development of opportunities to expand council members' abilities to

make substantive decisions, initiation of training on working with differing personality styles, and working to build communication skills.

In a 2005 analysis of the same data, Bruce, Boyd and Dooley (2005) evaluated whether the environment of the state 4-H council in Texas fostered transfer of training that youth received to life after the 4-H program. The authors noted that a transfer of skills was unlikely among members who did not see the relevance of their state 4-H council training, who comprised 46% of the sample. The authors noted that the 54% who had positive outcome expectancies from their state 4-H council experience and saw relevance in the training they received had a greater chance of transferring skills learned from the state 4-H council experience.

Boleman, Merten, and Hall (2008) surveyed 38 Texas 4-H alumni who had served on their state 4-H council over a 20 year period, assessing their views on the impact of the experience on life skills and career development. The sample reported that the experience had a particularly strong impact on their development of oral communication skills and self-esteem, as well as their ability to relate to others and work in teams. Analysis of the data revealed leadership as the category of respondents' top takeaways from the experience, with subcategories of confidence, communication, networking, leadership, and management skills, respectively. The researchers found little difference between those who had served as officers and those who had not.

A qualitative study by Anderson, Bruce, and Mouton (2010) offers important parallels to this study, even though it did not specifically target the state 4-H council experience. Through semi-structured interviews of 13 college-aged 4-H alumni the researchers explored the contribution of 4-H experience to their samples' development of

leadership, life skills, and desire to remain involved with the organization. Noting that college level 4-H alumni are a population that is still largely unstudied, the researchers found that many in their sample believed 4-H had a strong positive influence on their personal and professional development. These impacts included career choices and the 4-H *essential elements* of 4-H: *belonging, independence, generosity*, and *mastery* (Brendtro, Van Bockern, & Clemenston, 1995; Kress, 2014; Rennekamp, 2014).

The sample in Anderson, Bruce, and Mouton's (2010) study reported that career choice was impacted through the development of effective work habits, exposure to additional careers, and exposure to college majors. Their sense of belonging was influenced by networking, relationships with adults and peers, and a role in mentoring younger 4-H members. Self-efficacy and confidence were elements of personal responsibility and discipline that the sample felt contributed to greater independence, and this confidence included the development of interpersonal skills. Mastery, the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills along with the willingness to take risks, was developed through opportunities for self-directed learning based on individual interests, experience in achieving large goals, and in building public speaking skills. Finally, generosity – encompassing service, tolerance, and compassion – was fostered by 4-H community service experiences, and led to a desire to give back to the 4-H organization for many in the study.

Together, these studies suggest that serving on a state 4-H council can be valuable to the development of youth and provide insights into particular areas of development. Common themes of these studies include career readiness, leadership development, and the building of close relationships with other council members. This study is based on a

council model that already embodied many of the recommendations made by Bruce, Boyd, and Dooley (2004), such as opportunities for substantive decision making and training on differing personality styles, and builds on previous studies in a number of ways. While the previous studies did not explore issues of diversity, this study offers insights into dimensions of a multicultural experience. This study connects the study of state 4-H council experience to contemporary Positive Youth Development theory (Arnold, 2018), provides additional context for past findings, offers new insights into the potential for lasting impacts of service on a state 4-H council, and suggests new avenues for future research.

Theoretical Framework of the Present Study

In the last two decades, strengths-based approaches to the study of adolescence have emerged in the literature, which have collectively formed the basis of Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011). In contrast to the paradigm that dominated the study of adolescence for the last 5 decades, PYD theory frames adolescence as a period rich with inherent strengths rather than a time of developmental deficits and undesirable behaviors (Damon, 2004; Geldof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2013; Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2013; Rennekamp, 2014; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). PYD theory inherently assumes that youth have the ability to become positive and contributing members of society (Arnett, 2006; Durlak et al., 2007; Halverson, 2010; Lerner, 2005) and the potential for very positive and productive developmental trajectories that will continue across their lifespan "when they develop in the context of communities rich in assets aligned with their strengths" (Lerner, 2005, p. 19).

One component that weaves throughout PYD theory is the concept of relationships between individuals and their contexts. These contexts have multiple levels and may include their circle of friends, the groups they belong to, normative assumptions pertaining to their role within an organization, and more. Contemporary youth development research has increasingly moved beyond a focus on individual variables alone and focused greater attention on these individual-context relationships (Ramey & Krasnor, 2012; Youngblade & Theokas, 2006). In essence, the literature suggests that the relationship between an individual and their contexts is *adaptive* when each benefits from the relationship (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011). Bi-directional, mutually beneficial individual-context relationships are a construct central to this study.

A second PYD construct important to this study is the concept of *sparks*, which Scales, Benson, and Roehlkepartain (2010) define as "a passion for a self-identified interest, skill, or capacity that metaphorically lights a fire in an adolescent's life, providing energy, joy, purpose, and direction" (p. 264). Opportunities for youth to develop and identify their sparks can come from supportive relationships and opportunities for empowerment (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010) like that which a 4-H program can provide over time. Current and emerging research suggests that youth engagement in these spark activities is a predictor of positive adjustment, which includes a larger sense of purpose in life, more optimism, and higher self-esteem over time (DesRoches & Willoughby, 2013; Froh et al., 2010). While the term "sparks" is used most frequently used in contemporary PYD literature, the concept has been developed under a variety of other names as well. DesRoches and Willoughby (2014) use the term "valued activities" and note that this concept is also referred to in the literature as

"passions" (e.g., Vallerand et al. 2003) and "self-defining activities" (Coatsworth, Palen, Sharp, & Ferrer-Wreder, 2006).

Within the contexts of sparks and bi-directional individual-context relationships, this study explored three specific areas of the State 4-H Council experience: *social embeddedness, leadership empowerment,* and *thriving.* The first area, social embeddedness, was originally formulated by Granovetter (1985) to describe the relationship between individual actions and social relations in a context of economic behavior. Granovetter (1985) maintained that individual actions are heavily influenced by the normative assumptions they share with other individuals – and networks of such individuals – with whom they closely interact (Granovetter, 1985; Little, 2012). Further, Granovetter (1985) asserted that these social relations influence purposive action through generation of trust and "discouragement of malfeasance," which he defines as "distrust, opportunism, and disorder" (p. 491). For the purposes of this study, social embeddedness refers to the social aspects of an individual's role on the State 4-H Council, which include expected standards of behavior, shared goals, the building of teamwork, self-regulation, and understanding of self in relation to the larger group through the building of strong positive relationships.

The second area, leadership empowerment, refers to the development of individual strengths and capacities that facilitate positive and mutually influential adolescent relationships with the families, friends, groups, schools, and communities that comprise the contexts in which they live (Lerner, 2004; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). These contexts may include family, school, work, teams, 4-H club, and peers, as well as the larger contexts of neighborhoods and communities

(Youngblade & Theokas, 2006). Examples of the strengths and capacities being developed may include the opportunity to contribute to one's community, build experience in consequential decision-making, participate in youth-adult partnerships, develop public speaking skills and build the perception of oneself as a leader, through purposeful action and interactive processes between the youth and their contexts (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2012).

Finally, the third area is thriving, which is a concept closely linked in PYD theory to individual-context relationships and sparks. Thriving is the growth of attributes which allow a young person to flourish (Arnold, 2018). Thriving occurs over time as youth identify their sparks and take action to pursue them, with these efforts supported and nurtured through their relationship with those in their surrounding contexts (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011). Individual-context relationships are central to this process of thriving (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2012), and regulate the very course of an adolescent's development (Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner et al., 2011). Emerging research by Arnold (2018) leverages contemporary PYD research on sparks, mutually-beneficial individual-context relationships, and thriving to create the *4-H Thriving Model*. This model seeks to move past the descriptive nature of PYD research, bringing prescriptive focus to the relationship between these constructs and the experience of 4-H as a developmental context. This study will examine this aspect of the State 4-H Council experience with the 4-H Thriving Model in mind.

Methods

This study was guided by four research questions:

1) How did membership on the State 4-H Council influence individual actions during the time of service?
2) How did State 4-H Council membership impact individual member's views of themselves?
3) In what ways did State 4-H Council experience affect member's abilities to make an impact in the contexts where they live now?
4) How did State 4-H Council experience impact individual member's abilities to pursue their greatest dreams and interests?

The sample for this study was comprised of 15 individuals who had served on Missouri's State 4-H Council during the 2011-2013 timeframe. In Missouri, about 30% of the population lives on the 97% of the land classified as rural, meaning that almost 70% of Missourians live in approximately 3% of the land (Missouri Census Data Center, http://mcdc.missouri.edu/help/ten-things/urban-rural.html). Racial and ethnic minorities make up 8% of the population in rural counties of Missouri, and 25% of the population in urban counties (https://health.mo.gov/living/families/ruralhealth/ pdf/biennial2015.pdf). As mentioned above, youth who become State 4-H Council members are overwhelmingly likely to be rural, White, and monocultural. Members of the sample were in their mid-20s with communities of origin that ranged from rural Missouri, small towns, metropolitan suburbs, and large cities. At the time of the study, six members of the sample were students exclusively, six were working full time in their chosen career, and three were engaged in their career while taking university classes to complete their Master's degrees. Seven members of the sample were male and eight were female. One male and one female member of the sample are African-American and thirteen are White. This study

was conducted using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is particularly well suited for exploring and interpreting unique individual experiences, allowing the researcher to do so through a lens of reflection (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Because this study was conducted through practitioner research it is especially important to note the distinction between hermeneutic phenomenology, developed during the 1930s by Martin Heidegger, and the original Husserlian phenomenological approach developed in the early 1900s by Edmund Husserl.

While Husserl's approach strove for detachment and bracketing of prior assumptions – a challenge which might amplify Anderson's (1999) concerns – in order to *uncover the truth*, hermeneutic phenomenologists incorporate their understandings into the data derived from participants (Koch, 1999) in an intent to *interpret their experience*. Heidegger's phenomenology emphasized interpretive understanding over mere description, in the quest to examine the human experience, which he argued could only be accomplished through the interpreter's own lived experience (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009). The hermeneutic approach utilizes the knowledge and experience of the interviewer to enrich the data by offering common frames of reference and insights into highly contextualized experiences during the data gathering process.

Due to the highly contextual conditions of this study, the sample was recruited through a purposive sampling technique, identifying State 4-H Council alumni who served during 2011 to 2013. All members of the sample were members who the practitioner-researcher had worked with and were invited to participate through personal outreach. Once members of the sample were identified, data collection took place through individual semi-structured interviews. The data collection process consisted of a

preparation phase before each individual interview, which included a review of records and artifacts that pertained to the contextual relationship between the State 4-H Council and the interviewee. These artifacts typically included items such as digital correspondence, photos, and awards.

The interviews were digitally recorded, using smartphone technology in nine cases and video teleconferencing in five. Transcription took place through a combination of automated and manual methods. While the interviews were semi-structured, with a guiding list of specific interview questions to aid participants in describing their experiences, hermeneutic phenomenological interviews are typically co-creative experiences (Laverty, 2003). Interview questions were framed to elicit data centered around each participant's experience, rather than untethered personal opinion, and as a function of the existing relationship with the subjects, follow up discussion was often initiated by the interviewee rather than being guided by a set of pre-determined interview questions. This served as an additional indicator that the process of understanding was not hindered by the practitioner-researcher's prescriptive frame as the interviewer.

The hermeneutic circle process, as developed by Heidegger and further refined by Gadamer (Sloan & Bowe, 2013), aligns with open coding, abstraction, and axial coding techniques. First, in an open coding-type process, the practitioner-researcher identified the larger, more holistic themes from each interview transcript and recorded them on the transcript itself. Next, he identified individual elements throughout the transcript, which are experience-based statements or phrases, assigned each a code, and recorded the code for each above or below the holistic statements on the transcript. Finally, in an abstraction-type process, he refined contextual concepts and their elements, looking for

overlap and relatedness. This provided a lens for understanding shared experience, by dynamically examining both smaller and larger units of meaning. The process of moving back and forth between elements and context is a natural process and may even be unconscious in the course of an individual's daily life, and the practitioner-researcher's familiarity with the contextual elements of the State 4-H Council aided in the research process.

The most widely used criteria for assessing the validity of qualitative research is trustworthiness, a term coined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to indicate that the data supports an argument that the inquiry's findings are "worth paying attention to" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 2). Elo et al. (2016) maintain that trustworthiness is particularly important in inductive qualitative analysis, as the resulting categories are created directly from raw research data. The trustworthiness of the data in a study of this type is tied directly to that of the researcher who collects and analyzes it (Patton, 1999), and practitioner-researcher's experience over time with the State 4-H Council added value in the process of understanding.

Although the practitioner-researcher did not attempt to bracket his assumptions, as would a Husserlian phenomenological researcher, it was important to remain self-aware of the role that his biases and assumptions play (Crist & Tanner, 2003), both in any propensity to interpret data a certain way and to understand a deeper context to some of the information received from the interviews. To aid in trustworthiness, the preparation phase of data collection was coupled with a process of self-reflection to identify the biases and assumptions that the practitioner-researcher may have brought as data were collected. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative data analysis

recognizes the role of reflection in increasing the researcher's understandings, as they move back and forth between the larger context and individual elements over time (Sloan & Bowe, 2013).

These reflections were recorded in a reflective journal and were ongoing as the practitioner-researcher considered the ways in which his position and experience with the State 4-H Council affected how he received and interpreted the data being collected; (b) critiqued his own interview techniques; and (c) re-evaluated whether his approach was uncovering opinion or experience (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Laverty, 2003; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). In addition to the reflective journal, the practitioner-researcher created field notes during the interview process. These notes included observations of participant data that would not be captured in an audio interview but nevertheless conveyed meaning regarding the experience of the interviewees. These data included physical posture, facial expressions, vocal intonations, silences and the absences of speaking, variation in eye contact, and gestures that were useful in understanding their experience more fully (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Laverty, 2003).

Results

Significant themes were extracted from 14 transcripts. Next, individual elements – experience-based statements or phrases – throughout the transcript were identified and assigned a code, which was recorded on the transcript. Twenty six codes were developed in this phase, and examples are provided in Table 1. Finally, these codes were then refined and consolidated, resulting in six themes: Encounters with Diversity, Shared Experience, Leadership, Relationships, Career Preparation, and Empowerment. In interpreting the experiences of others phenomenologists must avoid succumbing to the

need for the convenience of rigid categorical boundaries, and it should be noted that there were occasional instances of interrelatedness between themes in this study in which elements of one theme (such as diversity) contributed to another theme, albeit in a more limited capacity. It should also be noted that these results are presented within the PYD framework that emphasizes the bidirectional impacts in the relationship between individuals and their surrounding contexts. Contexts can include the family, peers, work, and school, but it is also important to note larger contexts such as neighborhoods and communities (Youngblade & Theokas, 2006). One context of particular importance is the *context of origin,* which refers to the communities and settings that members of the sample experienced prior to their State 4-H Council role.

Theme 1: Encountering Diversity

For a large portion of the sample, state 4-H involvements were their first opportunities to work alongside peers of different races, cultures, and backgrounds. Most members of the sample came to the State 4-H Council experience from contexts of origin that were rural, lacking in racial diversity, and relatively uniform in their views of the world. Elements of these theme arose as several members of the sample shared about their monocultural origins, cultural tensions as they joined council, the process of establishing connections, and learning to understand and work with differing personality styles.

Monocultural origins. "I came from a very rural area," said Johnny, a White male. "Everyone at my school looked the same. There was not exactly a lot of diversity, not only going into the surface level things – gender, race, et cetera – but even political ideology and other things." While many of the rural youth shared similar backgrounds,

entry onto the State 4-H Council was something of a culture shock for non-White urban youth as well. "I think that was my big introduction to rural America," said Masoud, an African-American male who lived in Missouri's largest city when he joined the State 4-H Council. "It kind of struck me as odd because I could never fathom how anybody could live so far away from anything, you know? That was my big introduction to farm and rural life."

For many, the experience of coming onto the State 4-H Council was an adjustment that their context of origin had not prepared them for. Brock shared:

> When you grow up in any small town, you always think one way and don't understand when other people think a little bit different way, so when you're at those state events and you're meeting everybody I guess that was the most eye opening or surprising thing. Just how different life is everywhere else."

Cultural tensions. While a level of racial tension may be expected in a group with little collective experience in racial diversity, members of this sample reported that the disparity between the contexts of urban and rural cultures – and not those of race or ethnicity – was the largest divide.

While no members of the sample reported race-related conflicts, the experiences of Masoud and Grace illustrate that those of different cultural backgrounds sometimes experienced conflict with those of the same race. Masoud recalled:

> I don't think there's ever been any (racial) friction in I think any of my three years. Um, I think that naturally there were some questions about city life, that type of things, and like culturally I think there were obviously questions, but as far as I

know there wasn't any friction. For me, like adjustment-wise, yeah, it was a little bit different, but I don't think there was any.

Grace, a White female from the same city as Masoud, was surprised in a conversation with an older member from a rural community when she first joined the State 4-H Council:

> He said something about he had a problem with some people from the city…something about he doesn't think they, like, have the same values as people from rural areas…. which I was really fascinated by because I didn't really necessarily understand that. I guess when I joined Council I didn't actually think it would be problematic, but then like as I stayed on Council longer I realized that people from rural areas were, like, weird about people from the city like me. And I'm not even, like, relatively diverse.

Establishing connections. Despite this lack of preparation, members moved forward and became acquainted with their peers as they began working in groups and on projects. While comments from most of the sample included stories of Council members embracing diversity, it was clear some of their peers had not been equipped in their background with the same frame of reference. Members with greater experience in multiculturalism became leaders in establishing communication structures needed for effectiveness. "It was a bit of a mix," said Johnny, when asked how other White youth from his very rural part of the state initially felt about working alongside peers of a different race and culture. "One thing I think that really helped catalyze that is our (African-American) Reps that we did have on the Lincoln University side. They very

much helped to make communication a two way street, and not really make it an ‘us and them’ thing. It's just ‘we're all together.’"

Despite these beginnings, reflections from the sample on the totality of their State 4-H Council experience painted a larger portrait of a council who shared a sense of purpose and a common vision. Masoud shared insights into how the work of State 4-H Council helped move a new group from limited cultural competence to acceptance:

> I feel like generally people did want to get along, but we always had kind of like a united purpose or cause to complete or to do. So I think naturally, you do whatever that cause was, you know, there wasn't any friction at that point. It was “We have a job to do, and also can have a little bit of fun while we're here.”

Personality styles. While experience working alongside peers of other cultures and races was key to building competencies, members related to each other as individual personalities once their group began to form. Many reported that the opportunity to understand the diverse personalities they were working with on State 4-H Council played a foundational role in becoming effective leaders. Grace recalled here experience after a training involving a colors-based personality test:

> That honestly really helped because then it was like, “Oh, like I get that that person's ‘orange’ or whatever. So I get that they are, you know, they're really loud and they love being like the front center of attention. They want to be that person. But like I'm ‘green,’ so like everyone like knows that I get annoyed when people interrupt me. Understanding that really helped understand each other's strengths and differences as well.

In their study of Texas State 4-H Council members, Bruce, Boyd and Dooley (2004) suggest that extensive training in personality types would benefit that group. With greater understanding of the personalities around them, Missouri State 4-H Council alumni shared that they were able to build important connections across differing backgrounds and ideologies. Masoud shared that with these understandings, his Council experience "taught me how to, how to work with different people and kind of how to cohabitate a space with them, because it's not easy when you have a room full of people all with strong personalities, trying to get one thing done." This would also be echoed by Randal later as he spoke of his career effectiveness, and it is interesting that themes of race and diversity are not found in any of the previous studies of state 4-H council members or college-aged 4-H alumni. As a whole, members of this sample who mentioned the topic placed great value on experiencing diversity through their State 4-H Council role.

Theme 2: Changes in Contexts

The sample reported that membership led to changes in the contexts in which they were immersed as a result of their State 4-H Council role. As noted above, an individual's contexts may be tangible or conceptual, ranging from their circle of friends to the *normative assumptions* (Granovetter, 1985) pertaining to their role within an organization. The emphasis of PYD theory on bidirectional impacts of the relationships between individuals and their contexts holds that changes in these contexts will have impact on the individual as well. Three contextual changes reported by the sample included normative assumptions among State 4-H Council members, validation from adults and recognition from their peers.

Normative assumptions. The duty to play major roles in planning and facilitating two state 4-H events put Council members in a position of working towards common goals. As Masoud's comments in the discussion of Theme 1 illustrated above, these shared responsibilities shaped the State 4-H Council as a context that was goal-oriented and required individuals to move forward towards those goals regardless of their differences.

While the Code of Conduct is intended to establish shared expectations and standards of behavior, most of the research participants reported that these expectations were more enhanced, but not a significant departure from those established in their contexts of origin. Some, like Carrie, found a sense of validation in the formality of a code of conduct:

> I would say I was kind of used to those expectations, just from my family, but having those expectations kind of in writing that were official, I think it was kind of nice because I was already cautious of who I was and how I was presenting myself, but having it officially was kind of being recognized that I was… I dunno, it was nice.

Validation from adults. All members of the sample described levels of validation from the adults in their contexts. "I think adults viewed me a little bit different," said Saeed, "simply because it was to them –and to me – a leadership position, so it kind of made me stand out from the average high schooler I guess." In Masoud's heavily urban environment, he noted that 4-H involvement was uncommon. "It's not something that everybody is involved with, so it kind of set me apart from other high schoolers my age, I'd say, from an adult perspective."

Among the adults in their lives, parent response was a strong indicator of this theme as well. "The parents of the kids would ask me questions, like about how their kid could become a member of Council too," said Rebeccah. "I was definitely a role model for a lot of the kids." While they had anticipated a level of admiration from younger children, the added attention from adults came as something of a surprise. Participants described parents regularly asking them to help build their child's confidence and share about their experiences, as they sought to facilitate their child's development. Said Randall, "Some adults even, like, looked up to me in a way."

In addition to their parents and teachers, several began to notice changes in how adult 4-H professionals were treating them as well. "You were more likely to get a little more rope essentially with things," said Jackson, "because people trusted you more. You were looked upon that you wouldn't, again, do dumb things and that you would make the right decisions most of the time." The increase in adult expectations from the status of being a Council member led to new 4-H leadership opportunities. "You build a pretty good relationship with your youth specialist and everybody you work with on Council because you spend a lot of time with them," said Clay. "I think that the way they saw us might have transitioned from just *kids* to *young adult*."

Recognition from peers. For those in the sample with high levels of 4-H dosage in their immediate friends and family, becoming a member of the State 4-H Council was a cause for recognition from other youth. Rebeccah spoke of becoming a more visible role model for other youth in her local 4-H club. "They were like, 'Ohhh this girl is on Council, that's really cool!'" Kendrick recalled his first 4-H club meeting after being elected to Council. "When I came back with that (green) jacket, you know, knowing that

I was on something more than just a group or a club level, I came back with a lot more respect from other kids," said Kendrick, whose family and circle of friends were highly steeped in the local 4-H program. He described being asked with sudden frequency for input on activities within his local 4-H club, being asked to help whenever an extra hand was needed at the local fair, and being given more opportunities to lead various groups.

Conversely, new Council members with low 4-H dosage in their communities frequently described an absence of recognition. "I think that it was met with curiosity just because 4-H was considered a farm thing," said Masoud. "It was like, 'Oh, why are you on that?' I would just say natural curiosity. No negative or positive." Interestingly, despite their cultural divide, this lack of recognition was an experience sometimes shared by rural and urban youth alike. "Oh God, never," said Annabeth when asked if she ever received recognition for being on State 4-H Council. In her small school, she contrasted her experience with attention that directed towards a classmate who was on a children's theatre board. "He got half a spread in the school yearbook," she said, "and I was like, 'I was almost the president of the Missouri 4-H. Anybody? No?' It was very strange."

Even who enjoyed validation by their school administrators could find that support having a dampening effect on the recognition they received from peers. "I'd say that some of them that had a bit of a grasp on it, probably thought it was a cool thing," said Dustin. "But yet there were certainly others that are just like, 'Why isn't he ever in school?' I mean, it's difficult for some of my classmates to see, 'Well, he gets out of school to go help with Teen Conference. Why can't I get out of school to go to the Cardinals game?'"

Theme 3. Individual Changes.

Positive Youth Development theory maintains that individuals and their contexts each impact the other, creating changes in the other that may be positive or negative. Thus, the changes in context described in the second theme were reasonably expected to have individual impacts on State 4-H Council members, just as they impacted their surrounding contexts. Individual changes included growth from individual autonomy, heightened self-awareness, and changes in the image of themselves as leaders.

Growth from autonomy. While Council members shared a set of normative assumptions (Granovetter, 1985) about the responsibilities and expectations of their role, they also enjoyed individual autonomy in how they defined it. "I think we all had this common mission of who we wanted to represent, what we stood for, and how much we cared about the people that we surrounded ourselves with and what community impacts that we had," said Ridley. However, she expressed her surprise at how much autonomy members had in creating their approach:

> I expected it to be sort of this very linear approach. Like "everyone must do A, everyone must do B, everyone must do C" and it all must be the same. I think 4-H really provided an opportunity…it allowed each of us to sort of highlight our own personality and do the things that we were really passionate about. I think in the end this made us better officers because we could really tie into what our skillset was.

Mary approached her Council role as being a connection between youth and adults, to be "someone closer to the youth that are attending different events, and in different programs someone at the state level that they are more relatable to." Conversely, Carrie approached her role through her impact on younger 4-H members. "Our role was to be a

role model to Missouri 4-H'ers everywhere," she said. "I think we were there to get everyone excited, to keep everyone interested. We brought ideas to the table." Regardless of the approach, "I feel like they shared the same vision," said Jackson. "They might go about it differently because there's multiple ways to do the same task, multiple roads to get to one place, but I think all in all everybody shared the same belief." Ridley spoke to this autonomy that members enjoyed in determining their roles, saying, "Each of us had a different role really, because it was ours to create."

The autonomy members enjoyed in approaching their responsibilities may inform the sense of ownership they described towards their Council role. This ownership, combined with the heightened self-awareness and self-moderation of their own behavior, suggests intrinsic motivation and a strong sense of individual responsibility to the group. Larson (2000) asserts that intrinsic motivation, along with engagement and concentration directed towards a goal over time, are the three crucial elements of *initiative,* which he defines as "the ability to be motivated from within to direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal" (p. 170). Tasking individuals with limited experience formal responsibility for designing and implementing Teen Conference and State 4-H Congress certainly constitutes a challenging goal. Bolstered by a sense of shared understanding and reinforced from the peers and adults in their contexts of origin, Larson's (2000) theory aptly describes the fit between the individual experience of being a State 4-H Council member and the duties of their role.

Heightened self-awareness. With these normative assumptions in place among members of this state body, the responsibilities of membership brought a heightened self-awareness that impacted individual actions back in their home communities. This was

true among Council members with high dosages of 4-H in their communities of context, as well as for those whose contexts had low levels of 4-H influence. "I think I had to hold myself to a higher standard because people were looking up to me," said Rebeccah, whose parents were also her 4-H club leaders. "I could see people out in public who were in 4-H and they would recognize me, and so I wanted to be doing the right thing and be a role model." Jackson, whose circle of friends were comprised largely of other 4-H members, described his experience similarly:

> When you come on Council, you're in more of a fishbowl. You live life in a fishbowl because then you've got more eyes watching you. If a normal kid were to do something, its 'okay that's just a little kid being an idiot.' But if a Council kid does something, (its) "excuse me, it's a Council kid that's being an idiot and I know he's on council." You've got eyes on you all the time, and again with social media. You're expected not to, not to do stupid things like get in trouble and underage drinking and driving a hundred miles an hour and you know, just stuff that normal kids do. You were expected to be the leader and not do stuff like that. They expect you to be a kid because you're a teenager, but they expected you to be one of the elite.

Membership on the State 4-H Council left some feeling that they had more in common with fellow Council members than with peers in their home communities. Sorrel, whose circle of friends included very few 4-H'ers, recounted how State 4-H Council membership could impact how he spent time in his hometown:

> One of the big things in high school that a lot of my friends did do was to have like bonfires, you know, and drank beer and things like that. I didn't go to do

those things. It just made me more mindful of the role that I was playing and that I needed to think about actions and what it could affect and how. I was just thinking, like, I need to be more mindful of my actions rather than just do them and then think about it later. I probably would've done it a few times if I wasn't on Council, but since I was on Council I said, "Well, no, no, I don't want to risk it up so I'm just going to go home."

View of oneself as a leader. Larson (2000) also asserts that the development of initiative is a core component of positive youth development, and the sample shared that one impact of accomplishing these challenging goals through their time and effort was an evolving view of themselves as a leader. Taraji, a representative from Lincoln University, spoke to this growth process and the bi-directional relationship between leader and followers:

> When I'm a leader I just felt like my best, like "Do everything right." And then even, like, the people that like looks up to me they (sometimes) had to remind me. They had to remind me of myself. I had to remind me, like, "Okay, you're a leader, you're a human, you're going to make mistakes and everything. So that is okay." Whenever people did something (big) and then came and told me, I was really shocked. But like also like happy as well, because I'm like "Okay, I'm doing something right."

Beyond their overall 4-H experience, which all sample members credited with assisting in their personal growth and development, the sample described changes in their lives resulting from the State 4-H Council experience specifically. Randal shared:

> I'm the youngest of five, so I always had people to look up to. I never had to be the leader, I always had somebody to follow. When I took on the role of Council it just really grew my confidence, really grew my leadership abilities. I wouldn't have never had that, I don't think if it wasn't for this. I don't think I would have ever taken the roles I did. I'm not -- I'm going to be completely honest -- I don't think so, because I wouldn't have never got out of that mode of following somebody. I would have always been the sheep."

Referring to the contextual experiences of validation and recognition described above, Mary shared:

> I think it was a big motivator, because it made me feel, "Okay, I can be a leader, I can be very involved, and I can move high up in whatever I do. I took that with me through college and became a leader in several different organizations...

Rebeccah recalled, "I think it boosted my self-confidence. It definitely made me believe I *was* a leader and believe that I could, like, strive to do more things."

Theme 4 Leadership Development

Beyond the perceptions of themselves as leaders, the development of specific leadership abilities was a strong theme among all members of the sample. They explored this theme in terms of learning to organize others, finding their own leadership voice, developing leadership strategies, and gaining experience from making impactful decisions. As Members shared experiences around the theme of leadership, a common element involved the concept of management. For Billie, a photojournalist, the ability to organize other people is a critical skill developed through her State 4-H Council experience.

> I work with creative people all the time, and so when I'm working with photographers and I'm working with videographers, like there is no way to achieve success unless you can tell someone what your vision is. You can outline exactly what you want to see happen, but you have to be able to get other people to see that vision too and want to take action on it. Council taught me that if you want anything to happen, you have to get enough people to buy into it, to really want to be a part of it too, and to see that vision that you're creating. I think we practiced that over and over again when we would plan events or even when we wanted to make a change that we saw within our own region or at the state level.

For Mary, the committee work required for state event planning was valuable in creating her own understandings of how leadership works:

> I think a good leader is more one-on-one with the people they are leading, versus saying 'Hey, I'm the leader, I'm in charge, I'm the head honcho.' If you're a leader, you're just the person other people rely on to make sure everything's going straight. You're not dictating how everything works. I think it's hard for people to realize that."

Members of the sample described the process of joining the Council, ascertaining the wide range of leadership styles, and finding their place in a group that was densely packed with strong leaders. "I think naturally a lot of people were kind of wanting to be like the main leadership position, like take charge of this and take charge of that," recalled Masoud. "I feel like it's like the kind of the leaders, the workers, and then kind of the people that just took cues from everybody else." The robust exchanges could require much energy from those involved. "Sometimes you have to decide what hill

you're going to die on," said Johnny, who eventually served as Council President. "For me, the Congress t-shirts were not the one, but on other perspectives you can't let people get ran over when it's something of value."

For Taraji, being one of the leaders was important. "I know most of the time I was pretty much able to speak my mind if I had ideas, and sometimes people would kind of roll with it or they kind of like switched it around a little bit, but I was always able to speak to my mind." Others, like Annabeth, found value in learning to pick her battles. "I feel like something that you learn is how to speak up to make change, but you also learn how to bite your lip when it's not going to matter in the end."

Others still were content to leave the top leadership roles to those who desired them most. "I don't think I was like a leader on council," said Rebeccah. "I think I was more of a follower on Council, because there's so many people that, like, had a lot of passion and like they wanted to be like the main leader. But then in my community I was more of a leader." For Rebeccah, contentment came from the positional authority of a State 4-H Council member, which provided influence that she could leverage in her community of context. "In my club I met a lot of individuals with disabilities, and I think I kind of served as a mentor for them…and helped them to feel more included. You have to be different leaders in different situations."

As they worked to address the different demands of Teen Conference and State 4-H Congress, Council members' sense of ownership varied between the two events. "Teen Conference was...kind of like *our baby*," recalled Sorrell, using a term echoed by other members of the sample when describing this event. "We went in and we basically did everything." Grace described a sense of greater meaning that came with greater

responsibility: “I feel like Teen Conference is really where we got to make a huge impact, because we actually got to plan the workshops, plan what the kids do, all that kind of stuff.”

Through their work with both events, members realized a need to develop alternate leadership strategies for their work with differing audiences. Carrie recalled:

> When you’re an 11-12 yr. old kid, teenagers are ‘adults’ in your mind. Cool adults. You have authority, in their minds at least. And then Congress is a little different, because you are a leader but you are the same age as your peers that are there, so you can’t be bossy, per se,…but you have authority as well.”

Unlike Grace, who ascribed greater meaning to the event where she felt greater ownership, Carrie found that the Congress experience resonated more strongly as she pursued her career:

> As a professional you are a lot of times the same age as your workers, or even younger, and so you have to know how to get along with them and be friendly with them, but ‘don’t cross that line’ because you are in a leadership role. So I thought State 4-H Congress definitely taught us that, which is awesome.

The daunting challenge of planning two large events are made possible by breaking responsibilities down into manageable tasks. Small committees address the components of each program, and for Grace the committee experience was more meaningful than even the officer role of Council Secretary that she later served in. “I was the chair of that (committee) one year and that was my favorite leadership opportunity I had,” she said. Mary shared, “On your committee you had to really take off and go with it…making sure everyone on our committee was working through their part of it to make

sure that everything was where it needed to be was very important." Brock shared that committee work was important to building strong relationships on Council, noting "I think we got quite a bit of work done, but I think during those individual times we probably also learned the most about people."

Through committee work, the State 4-H Council members learned about themselves as leaders and began to develop more effective leadership strategies. "It's not always, you know, just showing people how to lead," said Masoud, "it's leading by your actions. So I think that's one thing that stuck with me." Through actual experience, members grew beyond their preconceptions of leadership and formed experience-based understandings, as Brock explained:

> Going in, the idea what I thought was a good leader might have been micromanagement …(but) each situation demands a different type of leadership. Some people like to be told each and every move, and other people like to be given a broad idea and like to use their own creativity and go from there. People come to you saying 'I got this problem,' and mostly people just want to be heard. There's not even a real solution and they don't need a real solution a lot of times. They need to be heard, and voicing that to you is really what they need."

In their study of Texas State 4-H Council members, Bruce, Boyd, and Dooley (2004) identified *decision-making, relationships* and *learning about self* as three of the leadership skills alumni identified through their council experience. The authors' recommendations included expanding opportunities for council members to get to know each other and expand decision-making opportunities (Bruce, Boyd & Dooley, 2004). The sample reported that the committee work focus of Missouri's State 4-H Council

provided them opportunities to make impactful decisions, develop relationships, and learn about themselves in the course of their duties. By developing the skills to organize others, finding their own leadership voice, developing individual leadership strategies, and experiencing involvement in making impactful decisions, these data from the college aged members of this sample offer specific and measurable avenues of research on 4-H impacts in this demographic.

Theme 5: Relationships

Several members of the sample described their State 4-H Council experience as taking place within a family-like atmosphere, and expressed feelings of closeness to other Council alumni even though they were not in regular communication. Most expected that any need for mutual support from their fellow Council alumni would be met if the need were to arise, and all had left the State 4-H Council experience with this expectation in place. As Randal shared:

> It was a family. I'm pretty sure if I called somebody from the group today and say, "Hey, this is going on in my life, " I think almost every single person I call would do try to help in some way. I don't think I would ever get turned down by anybody.

Ridley echoed the same sentiment, saying:

> If I needed them to be there or I needed a favor or if I wanted to say something to them, I felt like I could pick up the phone and call anyone. There isn't a moment in my mind where they wouldn't pick up the phone. I think that's because it truly was like a family environment.

The year-long nature of each State 4-H Council term allowed time for interpersonal relationships to form as members worked together on various tasks. At one extreme of this range were Brock and Rebeccah, who met on State 4-H Council and were two weeks from their wedding at the time of data collection. Reflecting on their relationship, Brock shared:

> I appreciate Council for that. A lot! I think we served for two years together and I might of talked to her here and there, but it was probably the last 4 or 5 months on Council that we actually started talking and realizing that we liked each other.

At the other end of this range was Annabeth, who did not feel that her Council relationships had followed her in life, or that she could pick up the phone and call another Council alum if she had a need. Describing her initial assumption that lifelong connections would be formed, Annabeth elaborated on the disconnect between her expectations of these relationships and her reality:

> It was like, "Oh my gosh, you will make so many" — emphasizing SO MANY — "lifelong friends." The truth? ONE. Not because they don't care about me, but because they're doing their own thing. You were with some of those people for like three years, and they got married and you weren't even invited, you know? I'm pretty sure Ridley's in D.C. and I don't even think we even 'Happy Birthday' each other anymore. And it's not that you don't matter and it's not the relationship that you have with them didn't matter…not because they don't care about you, not because you didn't honor or respect the relationship you had. It's just that you've grown apart.

While none of the sample were still in contact with large numbers of their council peers, most could name two or more who they were in regular communication with. Despite this, almost all shared a perception that the State 4-H Council experience resulted in lasting networks. While this reflection may partly represent the relationship expectations discussed above, Carrie described how networks remained intact despite a lack of active contact.

> I would have never thought while I was on Council, the people I met, how they would just continue to be in my life. And not just through work. The other day I met somebody kind of in passing who is a police officer from Ellerton. I was like, "Oh, my friend Jackson is a police officer, a highway patrolman in Ellerton!" And he said, "Oh yeah, he's my favorite highway guy! Every time I pull up on a scene and I know he's gonna be there, I know it's gonna be a good day."

The theme of close friendships growing among state 4-H council members arose in the study of Texas State 4-H Council (Bruce, Boyd, & Dooley, 2004), and having a sense of family was a key aspect of developing a sense of belonging for North Carolina 4-H alum (Anderson, Bruce, & Mouton, 2010). The theme of making close friendships were shared in this study by all except Annabeth, her comments suggest that establishing close friendships may be a shared expectation among members of a state 4-H council even when it is not a shared experience.

Theme 6: Career Preparation.

Closely tied with leadership, career preparation was another strong theme that arose from the shared experience of the sample. All members of the sample were currently on career or academic paths that satisfied them, and described State 4-H

Council experience as a key influence in their career readiness after high school. The subthemes that arose from the sample included *inspiration and direction*, *the ability to motivate others*, *experience with diversity*, *the capacity to adapt*, and *experience working in teams*.

Inspiration and direction. As members progressed through high school, the individual-context relationship of the State 4-H Council experience included working with older youth who were on positive life trajectories of their own. This exposure influenced younger members, who often did not encounter pushes towards higher education in their communities of context. As Johnny shared, this opened new possibilities that some may not have previously considered attainable. "It just makes you see that 'Oh, college or higher education seems to be a natural progression for other people on Council' and it's like, "Oh, well that's what I'm doing!" It just makes you follow in footsteps and see, 'Okay, these people are going and bettering themselves, so why shouldn't I?'"

While the modeling from older youth impacted younger members' aspirations for after high school, members felt that it provided a roadmap as well. "Coming in being 16 and I see these 18, 19, 20 year olds doing college, and like what they have to do to succeed, it gets you ready," said Annabeth. "It gets you ready faster." Reflecting the nature and effects of this readiness on her own career, Carrie shared:

> I am somebody who can think on their own, who can think on the fly, who has a plan and a plan B and a plan C, who can plan for the unexpected. We did a lot of that. I've been out of college and working for 3 years now, and before I turned 25 I bought a brand new car. I also bought a brand new house, by myself. I'm

currently the youngest sales manager in our company and I want to prove myself here.

The ability to motivate others. As they progressed through the early stages of their career path, the role of motivational abilities emerged as a second subtheme from the sample as a key to preparedness and success. The ability to motivate others effectively in the absence of authority or capital, which a more seasoned professional might enjoy, served as a valued asset to their early career success. Billie detailed exactly what she meant as she described these motivational skills:

> You sell it hard. You believe in something passionately, no matter how much work it's going to take. You have to know exactly what you want to see happen. It has to be an educated thing, it has to be a reason that's well researched and well backed up, right?

In these formative stages of their careers, the ability to motivate others allowed members of the sample to resolve the challenge of how to utilize their skillsets in the absence of power or control. Beyond the general ability to motivate, Annabeth shared that she developed an understanding of where to focus her efforts:

> You learn what motivates people when there's no money involved, so whenever you are in a situation where money becomes part of the motivator …you can help address what it is that they need outside of the money in order to be better for you and for whatever it is you're trying to accomplish."

With the development of motivational skills and an understanding of where to focus them, Johnny provided context for how these have come together to play a role in his career success in the Human Resources department at a university:

> While I don't necessarily have authority over certain individuals, I very much so have some responsibility for them doing what they're supposed to be doing. …there's people that aren't going to agree with you and are going to do their own thing, but it kind of helps you to prep and navigate how you can manage those sorts of things. Maybe you need to have a one-on-one discussion with someone or maybe they're just struggling and need help. That's one thing that's really helped me a lot. Being able to get people to do what needs to be done, even when you're not the one that signs their paycheck, is pretty valuable.

Experience with diversity. A third subtheme in career preparation was experience with diversity, which was an experiential progression of new member's initial experience of encountering diversity (Theme 1) when they joined State 4-H Council. Jackson is a law enforcement officer who has completed his education and reached a long-held career goal in the last two years. Like most of the sample, Jackson had been exposed to very little diversity in his community of origin that would prepare him for pursuit of his career goals in the outside world. Reflecting on his State 4-H Council experience, Jackson stated:

> You know, I apply things that I learned as a Council member. As a Council member, you get to work with people from all across the state, all ethnic backgrounds, and … you're going to meet people that have different religions and different foods and have a different way of thinking. I think it has definitely helped me in my career goals in understanding and accepting people. I think it enhanced (my ability) to be more open to people's thoughts and beliefs and to not

look down on people. “You do you,” and if it's not affecting me or someone else, I don't care. As long as you're not causing havoc, I'm not worried about it.

The capacity to adapt. A fourth subtheme, the capacity to adapt, involves the samples experience with overcoming earlier prescriptions and being open to new possibilities. While it was unclear what specific State 4-H Council experiences may have contributed to this capacity to adapt, the practitioner-researcher believes it may be tied to (a) the experience of the State 4-H Council group process that often results in ideas being modified, (b) the experience of realities conflicting with plans in the execution of a state 4-H event, and (c) the greater range of observable experience available to Council members as their peer network expands.

One example of this capacity to adapt was provided by Ridley, a lobbyist in Washington D.C., who is in the course of changing direction, transitioning out of her long-planned career in a traditional agriculture field and into the pet food industry. Ridley shared that her growth from serving on the State 4-H Council was key to her capacity for change. “…My traditional perspective of things that I would be involved in kind of got broadened and scoped,” she said. Her relationship-building skills will be central to her success, as she works on “figuring out how we can be the linkages between sort of the traditional ag community, the food community and consumers who have cats and dogs.” The ability to accept opportunities that are outside the comfort of preconceived career plans served members of the sample in their pursuit of successful careers.

Experience working in teams. Finally, a fifth subtheme of experience working in teams emerged from the sample within the career preparation theme. Through their

work on committees and in small groups, members shared that their experience with interpersonal dynamics developed leadership abilities in smaller group settings. This was exemplified by Randal, who was promoted in the last year to a new role in the field of advanced generators, leading a PowerGen team in Chicago that repairs priority generators at hospitals and other critical locations. Reflecting on his Council experience in his ability to lead a newly forming team, Randal shared:

> I'm seeing a lot of familiar, familiar things happening. You have to take all these different ages and these different personalities and you're with...nine, 10 hours a day sometimes. I'm enjoying it more because of that group (State 4-H Council). I've definitely taken on pretty much the same role in this group that I have (as I did) within Council, except a lot more serious. Because, you know, I have to actually work!

Anderson, Bruce, and Mouton (2010) reported that many of the 4-H alumni in their study believed their general 4-H experience influenced their professional development. While detailed explanations were beyond the scope of the surveys, interview quotes provided by the authors suggested the reasons ranged from general identity shaping to being exposed to new ideas during their 4-H career. In their study of Texas 4-H Council alumni, Boleman, Merten, and Hall (2008) found that 71.4% of their sample also reported that their Texas 4-H Council experience had an influence on their career goals, though once again little information about the reasons for this was provided. Through the results above, this study offers insight into how State 4-H Council influenced individual career success, and provide insight as to why that might have been the case in the other studies as well.

Theme 7: Empowerment

The sixth theme that arose from the data involved the ability of individuals to exert influence upon the contexts of their lives and the power to explore their greatest dreams and interests. This is closely intertwined with the concept of *self-efficacy*, which is an individual's belief in their ability to influence events by their own actions in ways that produce desired effects and make a difference (Bandura, 2010). In their study of 4-H alumni, Anderson, Bruce, and Mouton (2010) treated signs of self-efficacy as a dimension of confidence, and both Rebeccah and Randal described growth in confidence as a result of their State 4-H Council experience. Because all members of the sample demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy in their comments and stories, the focus of this theme is not the *belief* in their own abilities but the actual empowerment to act on them. This empowerment was revealed by actions taken to pursue their dreams and interests, though self-efficacy wove throughout portions of this theme. In framing these data within a PYD framework for the purposes of this study, pursuit of one's greatest dreams is conceptualized as actions taken to align one's life trajectory with their sparks (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010).

Navigating towards sparks. Although this study was focused on the State 4-H Council experience, most of the sample reported that it was their overall 4-H experience – not just the State 4-H Council portion of it – that led to the discovery of important individual sparks (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). As the sample left their State 4-H Council years and branched out into adult careers, many sought to establish careers aligned with these sparks. For Rebeccah, the experience of having youth with autism in her 4-H club led to a spark of connection with this population that provided a

sense of purpose. "I got my start in it just in my club, of experience with that population, and I guess I helped mentor them too," she said. Ultimately, she decided, "that's the population I want to work with."

Weathering adversity. Others found the path to success in the adult world to be more difficult than initially expected. As Mary shared, Council members faced certain realities even after earning a college degree and beginning a career:

> When I was in 4-H I felt that opportunities constantly found me. And now that I'm an adult in a career, I found that I have to seek them out a little bit harder. That stuff isn't going to find you, that the opportunity to get a better job or to get a role on some committee or volunteer spot. You have to seek it. It took me awhile to realize that."

During his 4-H years, Brock found a passion for woodworking. Over time, he planned for a career that would engage these skills, but shared that "…stepping out as an actual adult, you kind of start to see that the world's not really what you thought it was." Like Ridley, Brock remained open to other career possibilities. "Being out in the world for a few years, I decided that woodworking wasn't really what I wanted to do," he said, "and so real estate is what I'm trying to move into." However, even as Brock adjusts his career path he continues to be guided by his sparks. "I don't think I'm gonna move completely off woodworking, though," he said. "I think long-term I'd like to flip houses."

Mary's experience above suggests that as individuals transition from youth to young adulthood, more attention from 4-H programs may be warranted towards the shift in responsibility for orienting oneself towards a thriving trajectory. Mary's comments suggest that, while assisted in this regard by caring adults throughout her 4-H career, her

embrace of growth opportunities through rich youth experiences – such as service on the State 4-H Council – fostered a self-efficacy (Bandura, 2010) and a confidence that she would eventually engage as she assumed responsibility for her own advancement. While Rebecca was able to identify a career path and Mary realized the need to act on her self-efficacy, Brock's experience suggests that the draw of individual sparks (Scales, Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2010) may remain present in career planning even during periods of seeming misalignment between sparks and career trajectory.

Sparks vs self-efficacy. Finally, some of the data from this study suggest that the embodiment of 4-H values and the development of self-efficacy through the State 4-H Council experience itself can be a complicating factor, rather than a conducive one, in the pursuit of individual dreams. Randal had always loved mechanics, but as he settled into a mechanical career he found himself wrestling with expectations he had internalized through his Council role. He explained:

> "Am I making a difference?" Because it's something that we always ask ourselves, you know. In 4-H that's a huge thing. "Am I making a difference, am I making a difference?" And "*how* can I make a difference?" And then I start thinking about that, you know, I'm keeping that generator running on that hospital, that nursing home that has all these people hooked into machines that have to live off of these machines. Power goes out all the time because of the grid system that's up here in Chicago, it's nuts, and that's why we work 10, 11 hour days. That's when I started thinking that, you know, it's a big, significant role.

For Randal, the successful pursuit of sparks alone was not enough. Though he reveled in the opportunity to engage in his life's interests, his high levels of self-efficacy,

strong sense of social responsibility, and recently formed view of himself as a leader led him to question whether he should spend his life pursuing his interests or making a difference in the world around. It was only after he was able to relate the pursuit of his sparks to a purpose that satisfied his self-efficacy that he found fulfillment. In terms of PYD theory, enrichment *from* his context was not enough for Randall, who was only fulfilled when he became satisfied that he was in a position where he was significantly contributing *to* his context as well. This underscores the vital importance of the bidirectional individual-context relationship in the orientation towards a thriving trajectory (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011).

Giving back. Recognition of a central role played by individual-context relationships provides possible insights into why members of the sample attached such value to their State 4-H Council experience. Like Randal, several members of the sample shared that their Council experience impacted their view of themselves as leaders, and influenced an expectation of themselves for greater levels of citizenship and volunteerism at the local level. The ability to add value to one's contexts through their association is a value that members of the sample operationalized as *giving back*.

In their study of 4-H alumni, Anderson, Bruce, and Mouton (2010) found that a large portion of their sample stressed the point that "they still would like to give back to 4-H, because they personally have received so much from the program" (p. 43). This desire combined with a strong sense of self-efficacy was apparent in the remarks of the sample members in this study. "I think volunteering is very important to me, and finding a way to give back to the community in some way," said Mary, "because that's such a big part of the 4-H experience, is helping other people."

Like Randal, members generally reported finding fulfillment in exerting a positive in the environments they've chosen to associate with. "I like to be able to have that input and voice of change and step up and say 'This here's a problem,'" said Brock. "I think that's what the (Council) experience affected for me, is recognizing the importance of the local stuff," said Annabeth. "That stuff that is directly impacting the people that are directly around you." As Mary described, these values of citizenship and volunteerism go beyond the individual. "It's something that's very important in our house. I think we spend almost as much time on our non-profit involvement as we do work some days."

Connection to higher education. For many in the sample, a significant source of empowerment was a connection to higher education and specifically the Land Grant University that sponsored the state 4-H program. Annabeth described the link between her State 4-H Council experience and her ability to engage with higher education to pursue her dreams:

> It was my thing. It was my one thing that got me out of my area and out of my house, you know? It got me into a world that I wouldn't have gotten into had I not done it. If I hadn't had those experiences, I always said that I probably would have went to the local community college and then I probably would've like babysat or washed and groomed dogs or something like that. I can see not having these experiences, not letting that push me to go to college, that's what I would have been. And it's not that those things aren't important, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that, but I definitely prefer *this*.

In addition to the influence of peer relationships, the experiences of being Council members on campus in leadership roles at state 4-H events contributed to a familiarity

with the Land Grant University as a ready-made avenue for pursuing individual career goals. "It impacted my college decision a lot," said Mary, who hails form a small rural town, as she described the impact of a relationship built over time. "I chose a bigger university than a lot of my peers, because I wasn't scared of it. Because I knew I knew people there who could help me, and I'd been there enough that I knew what to expect."

For Rebeccah, who hails from a large metropolitan area, the relationship with the Land Grant University became integral to the pursuit or her goal and she identified an advanced degree program. "I came here probably because of Council," she said. "I don't think I would've felt as comfortable coming to Mizzou if I hadn't been on council and drove here and went to Congress events." Rebeccah has recently begun a Master's program in Applied Behavioral Analysis and has started a job at a hospital where she will be doing her practicum.

For several members of the sample, the connection to higher education represented a source of empowerment in pursuing a future aligned with their sparks (Scales, Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2010). For some, it also represented an opportunity to empower others to do the same. Annabeth has a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts with a minor in Psychology, and is finishing her Master's degree in Counseling. She intends to do non-traditional counseling therapies that focus around the individual sparks of others, such as animals, music, and theatre. "I feel like if someone comes to you for counseling and it's not working for them, they might leave. But if someone comes to you for equestrian counseling and they fall in love with horses, you've probably changed their life in a pretty good way," she said.

Contemporary research on the impact of 4-H has established that youth involved in 4-H are significantly more likely than their non-4-H counterparts to have better grades, engage in more leadership roles, and go to college (Lerner et al., 2013). Given the nature of State 4-H Council experience as a leadership role, as described above by the members of this sample, the link between Council experience and college attendance merits further research. More specifically, using general 4-H participation and State 4-H Council participation as independent variables, the relationship between 4-H and attendance at the sponsoring Land Grant University is a direction for future research that holds potentially important ramifications for both.

Discussion

While previous research involving state 4-H councils and the influence of 4-H on young adulthood is limited, these existing studies offer valuable insights into the potential impact of largescale 4-H experience. Through the recollections of young adults on their adolescent experiences the present study connects past research to contemporary Positive Youth Development theory, provides additional context for past findings, offers new insights into the potential impact of service on a state 4-H council, and suggests new avenues for future research. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach to this research contributed significantly to the value of this study by leveraging the role of the practitioner-researcher in providing an interpretation of the State 4-H Council experience. Themes and elements from the data are discussed below in terms of the research questions and areas which guided the study.

How did membership on the State 4-H Council influence individual actions during the time of service?

With regard to the first research question, the data suggest that Council membership influenced individual actions through a combination of structural elements, enhanced expectations from the contexts in which they lived, and through a sense of shared understanding of the responsibilities and expectations of their role. Structural elements were important to this aspect of the State 4-H Council experience, as they provided a common set of rules and expectations for all members. However, these structures did not create the experience of belonging and interconnectedness with the group that characterized most of the samples' Council experience. The sample related their experiences of stepping into the roles that had inspired them when they were Teen Conference delegates themselves. Members reported a heightened sense of self-awareness, which led to a mindfulness and self-regulation in their behavior. In addition, younger members were influenced by older peers to continue growing after high school and pursue a future based around their individual goals and interests.

There is ample reason to believe that these members experienced a social embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) in their State 4-H Council experience, which was strengthened further by a sense of belonging that met a particular developmental need of adolescence. The sample provided several examples of how their individual actions were impacted by their close interactive relationships with other members the State 4-H Council, who they believed shared a set of normative assumptions (Granovetter, 1985). These assumptions included expected standards of behavior, shared goals and vision, a sense of belonging, and the belief that they could pursue and achieve large goals in terms of their own unique strengths. One area of future research should be the phenomenon of social embeddedness in a PYD framework, and to investigate whether social

embeddedness has an amplifying effect on the pro-social outcomes associated with State 4-H Council membership. Examples might include the extent to which council membership affected life choices among alumni who did not experience feelings of strong social connection during their state 4-H council service, or behavioral choices in young adults who still maintain connections with alumni they served with in a close-knit council group.

In emerging research on the connection between 4-H and adolescent thriving, Arnold's (2018) 4-H Thriving Model draws on previous work by Search Institute (2014) to emphasize intentional self-regulation and a growth mindset as two of the indicators of a thriving trajectory. These data offer reason to infer that service on the State 4-H Council contributes to thriving by creating a platform for particularly strong adaptive individual-context relationships, with both the Council member and 4-H (through Teen Conference, State 4-H Congress, and the Council itself) benefitting from the association. Arnold (2018) draws on a plethora of established research to identify developmental relationships with adults as a key component of 4-H as a developmental context. The unique opportunities offered by the State 4-H Council experience create such an optimal platform for these types of developmental relationships that further examination is justified as another avenue for future research.

How did State 4-H Council membership impact individual member's views of themselves?

With regards to the second research question, the sample reported that their views of themselves during adolescence changed through the State 4-H Council experience, influenced strongly by opportunities for individual growth and through their interaction

with their contexts. These individuals found a sense of belonging to an important group, built relationships with peers and experienced being recognized for their accomplishments. Through leadership experiences and the opportunities to work with diverse others to make impactful decisions, these Council members began to view themselves as leaders with substantial creative capacity. They learned to find their place in a group of other leaders, and experience being a leader themselves through impactful decision-making.

Members views of themselves were also influenced through recognition, validation, and the enhanced expectations they felt from the youth and adults in their contexts, which appears to have been more pronounced when those contexts had higher dosages of engagement with 4-H. They were often treated as leaders and valuable resources by adults, invited to engage in opportunities one might associate with people in these roles, and lauded as role models. These results align well with the Arnold's (2018) description of developmental relationships in the nurturing of youth sparks, and the 4-H Thriving model identifies *connection with others* and *personal responsibility* as two of the developmental outcomes of a thriving trajectory. Together, the data from this study suggest that changes in member's views of themselves through the State 4-H Council experience may orient them towards a more positive thriving trajectory.

In what ways did State 4-H Council experience affect member's abilities to make an impact in the contexts where they live now?

This research question extends the discussion beyond changes in individual actions and self-perceptions to the topic of actual capacities of individuals to effect changes in their contexts. Leadership emerged as a primary focal point in understanding

this, as sample members recounted that unique opportunities afforded by Council membership catalyzed growth in their abilities as teens. As participants were asked about specific elements of their experience, two common data points in the interviews were the process of planning the Teen Conference and State 4-H Congress events, which required work by committees to accomplish individual components of the event planning process. Through committee work during the planning process, the sample reported gaining skills in forming relationships, building networks, and developing effective leadership strategies that often ran counter to their preconceptions. Beyond the planning process, the experience of implementing two state 4-H events developed new abilities to motivate others and adapt leadership strategies to changing audiences.

Through the building of these skills, modeling of older youth, and acquisition of cultural competencies, the sample indicated that valuable career preparation occurred. The exposure to older youth on positive life trajectories influenced younger members, in both leadership development and in the pursuit of higher learning after high school. Members of the sample stated that the diversity of State 4-H Council members and the mix of urban and rural cultures allowed them to have experiences with diversity that they would not otherwise have received during their adolescence. This, in combination with personal growth and leadership skills they developed through their Council experience, empowered the sample to pursue leadership positions in the organizations they became interested in. It also opened doors to occupational and academic aspirations that they felt they would have not previously considered to be within reach. The sample comprised a group that placed high value on continuing to achieve, pursuing their sparks, and creating positive local impacts through their actions.

In their study of state 4-H council members in Texas, Bruce, Boyd, and Dooley (2004) emphasized the need for impactful leadership experiences. This study supports that conclusion, as the sample indicated these experiences continued to add value in their lives after Council. In addition to those discussed above, *pro-social orientation*, *openness to challenge and discovery*, and *goal management* comprise three additional indicators of a thriving trajectory in Arnold's (2018) 4-H Thriving Model. The data from this study suggest that State 4-H Council experience may empower youth with the skills to maintain a thriving trajectory as they pursue individual dreams and interests.

How did State 4-H Council experience impact individual member's abilities to pursue their greatest dreams and interests?

With regards to the final research question, the results of this study provide little indication that service on the State 4-H Council helps youth find their individual sparks as defined by Scales, Benson, and Roehlkepartain (2011). Rather, the data from the sample suggest that the State 4-H Council experience strengthened members' means to pursue their individual sparks, through growth in self-understanding, development of new skills, and large-scale leadership accomplishments. The State 4-H Council experience appears to have strengthened members' abilities to navigate chosen courses within their thriving trajectories and be resilient in the face of adversity.

Reflecting their stage of life, this sample indicated that the most important dreams and goals they are pursuing focus on their careers at the present time. Thus, the State 4-H Council experience impacted members' pursuit of their greatest dreams by empowering them with assets that aided them in building and navigating their careers in directions that lead towards their individual sparks. These assets included:

- Building the capacity to work alongside others of different cultures, races, ethnicities, and leadership styles, effectively over a sustained period of time.
- The ability to conduct their lives according to elevated expectations and standards for their own behavior, with intentionality, self-regulation, and self-awareness.
- Tangible leadership skills, such as the ability to organize others, build networks, assess other leaders, and motivate others in the absence of money or positional power.
- Building experienced-based self-concepts as leaders and decision-makers.

Implications

When seasoned practitioners with limited scholarly exposure hold limited views of what constitutes *real research,* the lack of translation between their insights and the scholarly literature is a missed opportunity for all concerned. Hermeneutic phenomenology is largely found in the domain of nursing research at the present time, but should be supported as a viable path of scholarly inquiry for seasoned research practitioners in youth-serving professions, as a method that recognizes the value of their insights and leverages this knowledge in informing a larger understanding of their professional work. The results of this study offer a number of implications that would not have been possible without a practitioner-based research approach.

Youth development programs should engage teens in impactful decision-making opportunities, based around individuals and contexts that they value. Teens should be treated as contributing partners with unique individual abilities, and engaged in meaningful decisions that go far beyond t-shirt designs and event themes. In this study, the ability to give back to the 4-H program, influence other youth, and help create

opportunities that improved other lives was meaningful to teens who had grown up in the 4-H program and valued it. They responded with focus and dedication, collaborating with diverse others around shared values to accomplish large goals.

In creating decision-making opportunities, youth-serving professionals should be aware that structural components of the process can lead to positive developmental outcomes, when purposefully designed to facilitate interaction and ideation. In this study, the formation of committees allowed the large responsibilities of program planning to be broken down into manageable tasks. This created opportunities for youth to build relationships, explore leadership, and be guided by adult mentors in ways that they were receptive to. This also created time-sensitive responsibilities embedded with a need for urgency and focus, giving youth of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds a means to engage and work towards common goals. Diversity in Missouri's State 4-H Council membership brought important benefits for all in this study, as members who came to Council with limited multicultural experience transitioned into college and careers. The alumni in the sample credited experience with diversity as a major contributor to their successes in young adulthood.

Youth-serving professionals should consider that celebrating youth who serve in leadership roles may have a variety of positive effects. This study suggests that the status of belonging to a leadership team can raise expectations, increase mindfulness, amplify positive role modeling impacts, affect how members are treated by adults, and enhance relationship development as youth bond over a unique experience. The members of this sample experienced an enhanced status during this period of their adolescence, which they felt they earned on the merits of their service-oriented duties rather than by simply

attaining a green Council jacket. They reported feeling a heightened awareness of their own behavior, and made choices in their teen lives that aligned with the expectations of their State 4-H Council role. They also reported being treated by the adults and peers in their contexts in ways that led to greater confidence and further developed their image of themselves as a leader.

Within the 4-H organization, members and programs can both benefit when state 4-H councils are expected – not just allowed – to make consequential decisions as valued partners in youth development. This creates meaningful work that spurs the formation of relationships and creates developmental opportunities that lay the groundwork for leadership and career readiness. Leadership ability, self-efficacy, and initiative (Larson, 2000) can be nurtured and grown when state 4-H council members are engaged in meaningful decision making around matters they value and given the freedom to bring their unique ideas to bear. Engaging these older youth as resources can also result in programs that better appeal to the needs and interests of the target audience.

Given the benefits that a state 4-H council can bring to members and the larger 4-H organization, it is important that these councils are structured to be representative of all the youth in their state. In order to harness the advantages of diversity, which was identified as a key asset by the sample in this study, a number of structural factors must be in place. Policies governing state 4-H council membership must be equitable and accessible to all 4-H members, support a balance of urban and rural influences, be designed to foster a representative mix of racial and ethnic diversity, and provide an inclusive environment that aligns with the values of Land Grant University non-discrimination policies.

While membership policies relying on equal representation from each geographic region may create a perception of fairness in state 4-H council membership, this type of policy can actually create disequity and reinforce structural barriers that restrict diversity. For example, the current bylaws of Missouri's State 4-H Council specify that each region may have up to four regional representatives on the State 4-H Council. However, over 97% of Missouri is classified as rural and approximately 70% of Missouri's population lives on 2.6% of its land (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The two MU Extension urban regions hold a combined 52.5% of the state's population, and are where over half of Missouri's non-White citizens reside (US Census Bureau, 2010). Thus, equal representation from each geographic area in Missouri has effectively reinforced limitations in the diversity of its membership and hampered the influence of youth not belonging to the predominant culture, as regions consisting almost entirely of White rural youth make up ¾ of the Council's representatives. With urban youth representing the third largest group of 4-H participants, this model fails to reflect the diversity of the Missouri's youth population or 4-H participation rates.

In response to the implications of this study, the transition to a more representative and inclusive State 4-H Council membership process in Missouri has begun. Boleman and Deals' (2008) four frames of organizational analysis suggest that changes to the State 4-H Council membership policies can be expected to face four types of hurdles. These include structural hurdles, such as tradition and governing documents designed to serve the status quo; symbolic hurdles, as parents and volunteers in various parts of the state view the value of a representative Council differently; and political hurdles, as higher level administrators must be more attuned to the complaints of

volunteers and members opposed to these changes (Bolman & Deal, 2008). However, the alignment between 4-H organizational values and Bolman and Deal's (2008) human resources frame provides the impetus for these changes, as this study suggests that greater levels of diversity holds positive benefits for participating youth, adult faculty members who work with State 4-H Council, and the young audiences who are served by the programs that are designed and influenced by State 4-H Council members.

Conclusion

State 4-H councils are good for youth, but they are also good for state 4-H programs and Land Grant Universities. Across the nation, Land Grant Universities seeking to bolster student recruitment are beginning to recognize that 4-H is at the heart of Cooperative Extension's warm relationships with populations around the state who are literally their target audience. State 4-H councils connect youth with the Land Grant University campus, provide role models to younger teens making this same connection through state 4-H events, and provide shining examples of the value that Extension engagement can add. The impact of 4-H on college aged alumni has been largely unstudied (Anderson, Bruce, & Mouton, 2010), and further research on the connection between Land Grant Universities and 4-H participation could provide valuable insights for both.

While previous studies did not include discussion of diversity, this study revealed that cultural capacity building and exposure to diversity resonated with the sample as extremely valuable aspects of their State 4-H Council experience. However, while the racial and ethnic makeup of this sample was technically representative of the State 4-H Council composition as a whole, this lack of diversity should be considered a limiting

factor. In states like Missouri that have only limited geographic pockets of diversity, state 4-H councils must adjust their policies and practices to establish equity and inclusion as part of the programmatic DNA. This strengthens the offerings that 4-H can provide to youth who serve on a state 4-H council, equipping them to pursue a life's work aligned with their sparks and navigate adversity.

This study suggests a number of directions for further research. First, future studies should explore the urban and rural divide, as youth can advance through adolescence without a sense of connection to the peer who lives only 60 miles away. Secondly, further exploration is warranted for the role of high expectations in youth contexts on individual self-regulation. Finally, additional research is called for in the use of intensive task-focused experiences – rather than training alone – to assist with individual development of multiculturalism, intergroup relationships, and identity development, as youth vie to position themselves for successful careers in industries that have yet to be invented..

Table 1 Example of Individual Elements With Their Recorded Code	
Experience-based Element	*Code*
So I think that that is awesome in the professional world, because as a professional you are a lot of times the same age as your workers, or even younger, and so you have to know how to get along with them and be friendly with them, but 'don't cross that line' because you are in a leadership role. So I thought State 4-H Congress definitely taught us that, which is awesome.	Career Preparation
I think it kind of helps me discern what type of leaders people are. I guess just kind of a sense of how people lead. Some people lead by telling, some people lead by example, some people lead by coercion… I'm able to discern between leadership abilities and capabilities.	Assessing Leaders
It impacted me, not every single day but I think it impacted me a lot. I think it boosted my self-confidence. It definitely made me believe I was a leader and believe that I could, like, strive to do more things. I really liked being looked up to as a role model. I think that kind of helped me believe that I could do more than I was doing.	Leadership Development

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SECTION SIX:

SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

Several years ago I sat in a dojo with a class full of students. The instructor asked, "How many of you would like to get your Black Belt?" Many raised their hand. The instructor then asked, "How many of you would like to *earn* your Black Belt?" The point was made, and resonated deeply with me. I had earned a Master's degree in my 20's, went on to earn that Black Belt in my 30's, and reasoned that a doctorate in my 40's was the next logical move. Though I knew I could accomplish large goals through diligence, work, and perseverance, it is probably best that I did not fully appreciate the volume of work that would be involved. It is only near the end of the journey that I can see the ground I have covered in accomplishing this life goal, and the many ways it has catalyzed my growth and a changing self-perception.

I entered the ELPA EdD program with a successful, 20-year professional background and a large amount of trepidation. After all, my post-Master's degree reading had largely consisted of news articles and works of fiction, not journal articles and other scholarly works. I had made forays into some of the research pertaining to my field, but did not feel a large connection with it. Meanwhile, my wife had recently began the University of Missouri's accelerated nursing program and had very practical concerns about raising our four year old daughter as a two-student parenting team. It was probably from pursuing my Black Belt despite a lack of any previous athleticism that I somehow felt comfortable diving into the EdD program with a lack of home support and scholarly drive.

As we began coursework, I was surprised to find the reading so interesting. In contrast to my last degree, I entered the EdD program with the advantages of life experience. The initial summer semester was thick with tension, and took on the feeling

for me of an almost sacred experience. Everyone was tightly wound and highly focused, but a comradery developed through the course of shared experience that enriched my connection to the program immensely. A strong bond was formed with that first working group that continued even across distance throughout the rest of the cohort experience. We were in close contact on the day of my defense, and I expect our enthusiastic support of each other's success to continue long into the future.

As a professional, this experience has developed within me an ability to connect with research and link it to my practice at levels far beyond anything I had previously attained. It has given me a sort of lattice on which to hang my knowledge and understandings, allowing me to see how they interrelate and which directions remain unexplored. I am capable of making data driven decisions at more complex levels and offering research-based contexts for many of the practices that define my profession. I have made it a mission of mine to connect Extension faculty to the science of our profession, and adapted an andragogical approach of framing complex scientific concepts in accessible, digestible terms. The cohort model has exposed me to new professional paradigms and a diverse array of colleagues, enhancing my frame of reference as I create new partnerships and opportunities. I have also developed a much stronger enjoyment of reading journal articles as I've become more strongly connected to a wider range of methodologies and analytical approaches.

The experience of writing this dissertation has had profound effects on my work with Missouri's State 4-H Council. The process of looking at the program objectively has led to recognition of structural barriers to diversity and inclusiveness, and this has resulted in significant changes to the structure of Council that will go into effect in 2020.

The process of enacting this change has created a wonderful illustration of the political, human resources, structural and symbolic frames of Bolman and Deal (2008), and this will serve as a foundation for presentations and instructional opportunities in the months to come.

The experience of conducting research involving individuals I had worked with as teens was extremely rewarding. The opportunity to have conversations with them as young adults gave me many surprising insights into the results of my own professional efforts, validated some practices, and alerted me to others that I should integrate more purposefully. For example, I was pleased to find that some of my mantras (i.e., "To be early is to be on time") had been internalized and valued, and was also gratified to see the significance of personality style training and the key role it played in group formation. I was surprised to learn about the incredibly profound significance in the experience of driving to Columbia for Council meetings (something I had never even considered), and of the value of the State 4-H Congress experience in learning to manage peers. Learning about the long term impacts of the experience from those who experienced it has given me greater mindfulness about certain program components and greater respect for others.

The experience of this journey has also changed me as a person. I've become aware of a quiet, internal confidence from all I have learned in successfully completing this experience. I also feel a strengthened ability to empower others whose voices may not otherwise be heard. Through this experience I have a much wider network, deeper insights into my own epistemology, and a sense of assuredness that I can make a difference in the contexts I inhabit. Most importantly, I bring these things to my role as a father to a highly intelligent daughter with limitless potential, and I see the ripple effects

of all I have gained from this experience resulting in positive impacts that I will never be able to fully conceptualize.

In considering what I would change about my experience, I would like to have identified the focus of my dissertation much earlier. This would have allowed me to progress more efficiently by familiarizing myself with the pertinent research earlier and at a more gradual pace. I also would spend more time getting to know my classmates on a deeper level, as I didn't fully appreciate at the time how connected we would all feel having shared this experience. Overall, however, I am very pleased with the ELPA Cohort 9 experience as it played out, and am grateful to be where I am at the end of it. As an Extension professional a large part of my job is to apply theory to practice, and this was the primary reason I chose to pursue an EdD over a PhD. This program has strengthened my ability to make change in the world, extend theory to action, create opportunities for others, and to be an agent of meaningful data-driven change.

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VITA

Bradd Anderson is a State 4-H Youth Development Specialist with the University of Missouri's 4-H Center for Youth Development. He works to create developmental opportunities and relationships that foster growth in youth leadership and communication skills. In this role, he coordinates Missouri's State 4-H Council and various statewide youth development programs. He also leads FilmFest 4-H, the national 4-H film festival, which he co-founded.

Bradd began his professional 4-H youth development career in Missouri, serving Crawford, Dent, and Phelps Counties, after working in the technology industry for three years with IBM's largest business partner in higher education. In this first professional 4-H role, he coordinated county youth development programs, engaged youth as partners in program development, and led activities ranging from the statewide aerospace camp to a local bicycle safety day.

In 2000, Bradd joined the 4-H/Army Youth Development Project, serving as a Youth Development Specialist for the Army's Training and Doctrine Major Command (TRADOC) and later the Northeast Regional Headquarters (NERO) in Hampton, Virginia. During Bradd's time as a specialist with the Army Project, he trained Child & Youth Services staff at 17 TRADOC Army installations and 23 NERO Army installations on a wide range of youth development topics, conducted inspections of School Age and Youth Services programs, and outbriefed Garrison Commanders on program operations. During this time he was recruited to join the adult advisory team of the Army Teen Panel, the Army's premiere group of youth ambassadors who represent the voice of Army youth worldwide.

After five years in the Specialist role, Bradd was promoted to become the 4-H/AYDP Youth Development Coordinator for Headquarters Dept. of Army, leading an international team of 4-H youth development specialists from seven Land Grant Universities, stationed in locations such as San Antonio, Rock Island, Honolulu, Heidelberg, Soul, and Hampton, Virginia. In this role, he monitored Specialist performance, provided technical assistance, wrote Army-wide standard operating procedures around child and youth programming, and continued his work with the Army Teen Panel. Through his roles with the 4-H/Army Youth Development Project, Bradd routinely interfaced with frontline staff as well as military leaders ranging from Garrison Commanders to the U.S. Army Chief of Staff.

Bradd returned to Missouri in 2007 to assume the duties of his current role. Bradd holds a Bachelor's Degree in Human Environmental Sciences, a Masters in Human Development and Family Studies, and a 1st degree Black Belt in Taekwondo.