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Abstract

This study evaluates Momentum Bicycle Clubs (MBC) through the empowerment-based positive youth development framework (EMPYD). Data were collected through eight cross-sectional focus groups of MBC youth participants (ages 10-17). Sessions included three topics: the MBC program, the mentors, and the bicycle, all of which elucidated elements of an EMPYD program for analysis. The data were analyzed utilizing an interpretative phenomenological approach. The results of the focus groups revealed how MBC empowers its youth participants. MBC displayed characteristics of the EMPYD model by providing youth with opportunities to develop mastery and moral identity in addition to the 5Cs of positive youth development. Interactions with a diverse set of mentors and peers allowed program participants to gain mastery of physical, social, and emotional skills. These connections also provided avenues for the development of empathy, caring, and character. MBC empowered its participants by fostering a sense of community that was dependable and consistent. However, the data did not reveal how or if MBC empowers youth to participate in active and engaged citizenship. MBC represents a programmatic model that utilizes many aspects of the EMPYD framework. MBC provide youth with the opportunity to develop mastery over the bicycle and to develop their moral reasoning through relationships with a group of adult mentors. With some adjustment, the program can further empower youth by providing intentional programming that focuses on culturally specific community building and by providing program participants with the opportunity to engage in culturally specific citizenship.

Keywords: youth development; under resourced youth; bicycles; recreation; empowerment

Introduction

Positive youth development (PYD) methods and mechanisms are used by organizations dedicated to healthy psychological and physical adolescent growth. PYD is a developmental process, a programming approach, and an organizational procedure (Lerner et al., 2011) that accentuates a youth's strengths and acknowledges the bidirectional influences between youth and their environments. The Five Cs of youth development (Lerner et al., 2005)—*confidence*, *competence*, *character*, *caring*, and *connection*—are common components of PYD. Some youth face more challenges than others based upon factors such as socioeconomic status, racial identification, one vs. two parent household, and the availability of healthy food and exercise, any of which can impact adolescent development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). The PYD approach provides support for youth who experience these challenges.

The empowerment-based positive youth development framework (EMPYD) was introduced by Travis and Leech (2014) to address the specific needs of minority youth and empower them to make a difference within their community. This framework—which adds *community* and *citizenship* to make the seven Cs of EMPYD—presents a vision of “healthy developmental trajectories for minority youth that are strength-based, developmental, culture-bound, and action-oriented” (Travis & Leech, 2014). While the framework was initially designed for minority youth, this study's authors believe it can be applied to youth from all backgrounds, due to the universal nature of community and citizenship.

This study investigates Momentum Bicycle Clubs (MBC) programming and outcomes through the EMPYD framework. MBC is a nonprofit organization that uses bicycles as a PYD mechanism (Clanton et al., 2021) to mentor under-resourced youth (ages 10–17), those particularly vulnerable to experiencing factors identified by Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) as challenging to youth development. Using participant-derived data, this paper explores and evaluates MBC programming elements and their alignment with the EMPYD model to determine the feasibility of advancing a successful PYD program to an EMPYD program.

Empowerment-Based Positive Youth Development

PYD is a developmental strength-based approach that views youth as “assets[,] not liabilities” and as equal partners (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The Five Cs of Youth Development is a commonly used PYD framework that suggests *competence*, *confidence*, *connection*, *character*, and *caring* are attributes exhibited by a flourishing adolescent (Geldhof et al., 2014; Lerner et al., 2005). The model is grounded in relational developmental systems theory, which emphasizes the importance of bidirectional interactions between an individual and their environment (Overton, 2015). These interactions regulate the pace, direction, and outcome of a person's development. When these interactions are mutually beneficial to both parties, they are considered adaptive (Lerner et al., 2013). According to the Five Cs framework, when the assets of youth are supported by their relational context, youth are more likely to exhibit the characteristics of the Five Cs (Bowers et al., 2010). *Competence* is exhibited when youth display mastery across physical, social, and emotional capabilities (Travis & Leech, 2014). Characteristics of confidence include exhibiting an internal sense of positive self-efficacy and worth (Bowers et al., 2020). *Character* is expressed through moral reasoning and empathetic behavior (Travis & Leech, 2014). Characteristics of *caring* reflect empathy, sympathy, and identification with others in their behavior (Lerner et al., 2005). Positive bidirectional relationships between parents, peers, and other proximal relationships are the characteristics of *connections* that foster PYD (Lerner et al., 2005).

The EMPYD framework expands the Five Cs by adding culturally specific dimensions and strengths to empower youth to gain confidence in their cultural identity and enact social change within their communities (Travis & Leech, 2014). The EMPYD framework was originally designed by Travis and Leech to examine the developmental experience of African American youth. The framework was created due to the lack of positive youth development research directly studying culturally bound developmental trajectories of African American youth. Their modified version of the Five Cs Framework provided an empirically testable model that was “strength-based, developmental, culture-bound, and action-oriented” (Travis & Leech, 2014, p.94). The direct focus on the African American experience is supported in part by Cornel West's (2004) concept of cultural armor. West argues that due to structural challenges, such as socioeconomic inequality and lack of access to resources, African Americans have

thin cultural armor to protect them from adverse developmental outcomes. The intention behind the EMPYD framework was to provide an opportunity to strengthen that cultural armor that can aid in empowering youth to make positive connections and contribute to their communities.

While Travis and Leech (2014) focused the EMPYD on a specific demographic for specific reasons, the authors of this article believe that the EMPYD model, like PYD, can be applied to youth from all backgrounds. Travis and Leech propose that their model provides reinforcing assets that “facilitate resilience amidst adversity and create optimal pathways to individual and community wellbeing” (Travis & Leech, 2014, p. 99). This is what it means to be *empowered*. The EMPYD model proposes two additional Cs to the original Five Cs model, *community* and *citizenship*. *Community* can be more than racial in nature, to include communities of any kind, including socioeconomic, educational, religious, or others that share a high level of connection. Similarly, engaged *citizenship* can benefit youth and communities of all backgrounds. This enhancement of the traditional Five Cs model provides pathways to empower youth of all backgrounds, and the current study examines the EMPYD framework from that perspective.

EMPYD suggests that the Five Cs are recursive processes where each C generates potential in other dimensions (Travis & Leech, 2014). Models 1 and 2 (Figure 1.) indicate that *connection* acts as the core indicator for two major recursive processes, *moral identity*, and *mastery*. The reinforcing nature of *moral identity* and *mastery* create opportunities for exponential growth of youth empowerment by providing pathways to develop resilience and improve individual and community well-being. Travis and Leech (2014) conceptualize *moral identity* as the result of the development of three of the Five Cs of youth development—*connection*, *caring*, and *character*—that reinforce themselves through a symbiotic relationship (Figure 1, Model 1). For example, adolescents who have positive *connections* with peers and parents report a strong disapproval for delinquency (*character*) (Wallace, 2002) and high levels of prosocial behavior (*caring*) (Decety, 2011). The second process proposed by EMPYD, *mastery*, is conceptualized as the result of a similar reinforcing relationship between *connection*, *confidence*, and *competence* (Figure 1, Model 2). Positive adult connections have been associated with the development of improved self-esteem (*confidence*) (King et al., 2018) and the development of skills such as improved academic performance (*competence*) (Murry et al., 2009).

The EMPYD framework proposes two additional Cs that result from *mastery* and the establishment of a *moral identity*. The sixth “C” that results from the achievement of *mastery* and *moral identity* is *community*. Specifically, a sense of community is established when an adolescent feels they are a member of a supportive and dependable structure (Evans, 2007). *Community* is also a recursive asset that reinforces *mastery* and *moral identity*. Model 3 (Figure 1.) displays how a strong sense of *community* can reinforce the development of *moral identity* assets, *connection*, *caring*, and *character* to create a *moral community*. Communities that provide adolescents with opportunities to model positive behaviors encourage the development of *moral identity* (Humphries et al., 2000). Model 4 (Figure 1.) displays how a strong sense of *community* can also reinforce the development of the three assets associated with *mastery*—*connection*, *confidence*, and *competence*—to create a *masterful community*. This symbiotic relationship has been observed in youth who report a strong sense of community in learning environments that encourage *mastery* (Yeager & Walton, 2011).

Model 5 (Figure 1) indicates that the seventh C, *citizenship*, acts as a reinforcing asset along with *connection* and *community* to act as anchors for *moral* and *masterful* communities. *Citizenship* is a multidimensional asset that includes performing a civic duty and engaging one’s skills and connections (Travis & Leech, 2014). EMPYD emphasizes that *citizenship* is the action element of empowerment within the framework and is concerned with actions that help youth advocate for their communities and their cultural and racial identities. Communities that encourage engaged *citizenship* within a structure led by trustworthy individuals who encourage youth to believe that their contributions matter can positively impact the development of adolescents’ *moral identity* (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). In addition, when youth are given *citizenship* opportunities such as agency to implement their own strategies or are empowered to lend their voices to issues in the community, they are more likely to develop the assets associated with a *masterful community*. (Delgado & Staples, 2007). The EMPYD framework emphasizes that youth who have a sense of *community* and an opportunity to engage in active *citizenship* gain empowerment by developing the consciousness, skills, and power to envision personal and collective well-being and understand their role in transforming the social conditions within their community (Travis, 2013).

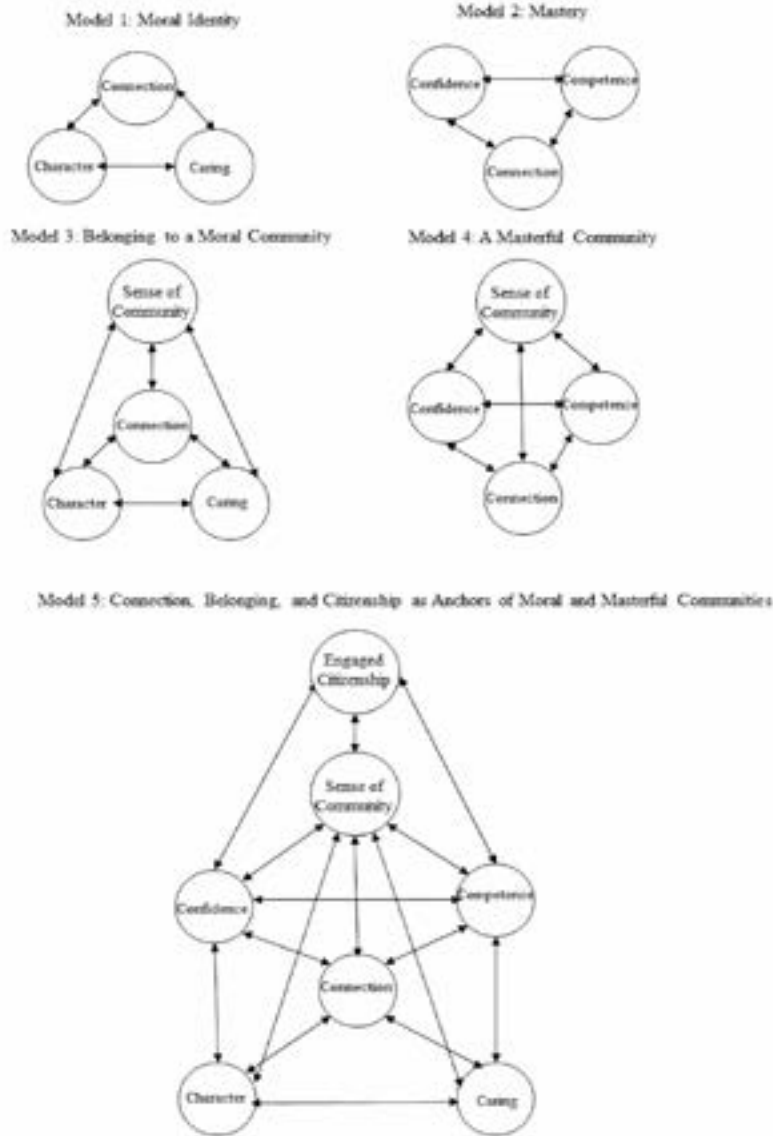


Figure 1. Empowerment Positive Youth Development Model (Travel & Leech, 2014)

Momentum Bike Clubs

Created in 2008, Momentum Bike Clubs (MBC) is a Greenville, South Carolina, nonprofit mentoring program that uses the bicycle as a medium to connect with primarily middle school students, grades 6–8. Most MBC youth live in under-resourced neighborhoods, which increases their odds of facing risk factors such as poverty, absentee parent(s), and insecure home life (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Demographically, although not by design, MBC youth participants were evenly divided between females/males and racially, between Black, Hispanic, and White (Davide Taylor, personal communication, January 22, 2020). MBC is promoted by individual schools and is open to all students.

MBC’s approach is anchored in PYD methodology, which intentionally engages youth in a constructive and affirming manner, building on the youths’ strengths and assets. Developing positive peer-to-peer and mentor-mentee relationships and providing consistent support is considered a key to building on a youth’s leadership potential (www.momentumbikeclub.org).

Clubs operate from either a community recreation center or a local public middle school, and at the time of this study there were 15 clubs with an average of 10 youth and four mentors each.

Mentors lead rides and other MBC events; teach basic bicycle care and repair, as well as safe-riding practices; determine weekly routes; and are the primary MBC contact with parents/guardians. Each youth receives a bike, helmet, water bottle, backpack, preride safety check lesson, and safe-riding instruction. Clubs ride weekly for two hours, weather permitting, and have scheduled stops with intentional activities and discussions on predetermined topics designed to foster healthy lifestyles, such as nutrition, health, gratitude, relationships, self-confidence, and problem resolution. Scheduled stop locations include parks and partner agencies, including businesses and a library. For example, a small organic grocery and cafe with outdoor tables is a partner agency, role-modeling healthy foods and encouraging discussion of healthy eating. Spontaneous discussions on various student-initiated topics occur organically and many are also mentoring opportunities.

In addition to the clubs, MBC conducts a Challenge Team composed of 35 high school students and 15 mentors. Challenge Team members are usually, but not necessarily, former members of a school club program. Challenge Team participants are older and at different places in life, with different needs and challenges. Challenge

Team programming and mentoring are more intensive and focused on leadership development, college preparation, internships with local businesses, and more demanding riding. This group meets on weekends for 15 hours a month.

Mentors are the key to meeting organizational goals and are recruited from a variety of sources. Most of the clubs are affiliated with a middle school, and by education district policy at least one teacher employed by the school must participate in the program, so at least one mentor per school club is an educator. Mentors are also recruited from other nonprofits, local universities, cycling clubs, and churches. However, most recruitment is by word of mouth, so mentors come from a variety of locations. There are targeted efforts to recruit a diverse mentor applicant pool. The mentor application requires information regarding bicycling, commitment, motivations to be a mentor, experience, and interest in working with youth. Applicants then interview with MBC staff. If selected, each mentor is subject to a background check and receives training on hard skills such as CPR, first aid, safe-riding practices, bicycle maintenance and repair, and soft skills such as mentorship, setting boundaries and expectations, and cultural competency, skills that all aid in creating an EMPYD program. Additionally, mentors are trained on the impacts of institutional racism and a trauma-informed approach to working with under-resourced youth. MBC administrators, local universities, and other nonprofits provide mentor training.

Mentors consistently ride with the same club(s) to build a stronger rapport with the youth and the assignment of a mentor to club is based upon their connection to the school, the club's need, the mentor's availability, geography, and/or established relationships. Through mentoring and bicycling, MBC strives to meet its stated goals:

- Provide group mentoring with peer support to youth from vulnerable communities and schools
- Manage bike clubs to follow principles of Positive Youth Development (PYD)
- Improve physical, mental, and technical bike riding abilities
- Increase knowledge and practice of healthy choices and nutrition
- Develop job skills through partnerships
- Provide referral services to families (David Taylor, personal communication, January 22, 2020)

Mentoring

A primary goal of MBC is to support youth through group mentoring. While many mentoring programs use a formal and traditional one-to-one (one mentor and one mentee) mentoring model, MBC employs a group mentoring approach, which establishes relationships within a group setting including multiple mentors and mentees (Carvin, 2011). Group mentoring also differs from natural mentoring, which is an informal relationship between youth and trusted nonparental adult mentors that organically provides a foundation of support and encouragement for youth (Meltzer et al., 2020) and guide youth in decision-making (Liang et al., 2008).

Many PYD programs use a formal one-to-one mentoring approach, and according to Pawson et al. (2004), many of these programs include curriculums related to youth skill development and decision-making. Formal one-to-one mentoring programs can be especially useful in under-resourced communities when natural mentors are not available, and the relationship can help youth grow in areas such as critical consciousness, social empowerment, and finding their voice (Rahm et al., 2014; Bowers et al., 2020; Pinckney et al., 2020). One-to-one mentoring has been found to reduce depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems while helping youth achieve healthy social relationships, academic achievement, and a positive outlook on life (Dubois et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2002; Lerner et al., 2013).

Although group mentoring differs structurally from one-to-one mentoring, both models encourage activities that develop skills and attitudes to foster positive change in behavioral, emotional, and academic areas for youth (Kuperminc, 2016). Group mentoring provides youth the opportunity to interact with several adults and peers at once. These interactions allow youth to build new relationships and learn from a variety of viewpoints and opinions. While group mentoring programs have shown positive outcomes in youth with varying demographics such as age, gender, and ethnicity, perhaps the most outstanding trait of group mentoring is its ability to relationally benefit both mentors and mentees while providing a sense of belonging while reinforcing group cohesion (Kuperminc, 2016; Carvin, 2011).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to evaluate MBC PYD programming through an EMPYD model lens to determine if the current MBC program aligned with the EMPYD model. This process aided in determining the feasibility of advancing a successful, well-established PYD program to an EMPYD program. This project seeks to better understand the understudied EMPYD model, and in so doing it may provide researchers and youth development professionals additional context to research, understand, and employ the EMPYD model.

Method

An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was employed due to its focus on understanding how individuals view specific experiences around a shared phenomenon (Miller, Chan, & Farmer, 2018; Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, 2010). IPA is a unique process and involves a double hermeneutic, as the researcher is attempting to understand the participants as the participants are attempting to understand their experience of the phenomenon (Smith, 2011). The researchers in this study are using IPA to understand the youths' experience with MBC.

Capturing detailed, first-person accounts of individuals' experiences with a specific phenomenon is the key data collection priority for an IPA (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, 2010). Data collection procedures are often semistructured, one-to-one interviews; however, focus groups are also used, providing that the researchers are careful to ensure each participant's individual experiences are allowed to be voiced (Love, Vetere, & Davis, 2020; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Focus groups were chosen because they promote discussion that may more robustly explore topics, encourage experiential reflection, and are appropriate for naturally occurring small groups sharing an experience (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, 2010; Morgan, 1977).

Procedures

This study was approved by Clemson University's IRB, and MBC granted permission for its name to be used in this article. Data was collected through eight one-hour-long focus groups of 5–8 MBC youth participants to gather their views and experiences of the MBC program, mentors, and bicycling. Seven focus groups were comprised of middle school MBC clubs, and one focus group consisted of Challenge Team youth, so the participants were a naturally occurring small group who knew and bicycled with each other regularly. The sessions took place at the schools during the clubs' regularly scheduled meeting times to encourage participation. Data collection was conducted by Clemson University faculty and graduate student researchers, and no MBC mentors or personnel were present during the focus groups. Researchers were trained to ensure that each focus group member had the opportunity to express their ideas without interference from other group members and to prevent a group member from dominating the process. Teamwork, respect for others, and collaboration is stressed through MBC programs and the youth exhibited these traits throughout the focus groups.

Two researchers led each focus group and asked a series of guiding questions to ensure specific topics were covered. Additional prompts were used to elicit deeper or broader information. Beginning questions were about the MBC program and gauged the participants' understanding of the purpose, their likes, dislikes, and what they learned, and suggested improvements. Questions then progressed to glean the participants' thoughts and relationships to bicycles and cycling, and the final section of questions was about the mentors. The researchers took notes throughout the process on the youths' responses and behaviors while responding, and the sessions were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

Analysis

While there is not a prescribed method for IPA data analysis, there are common principles such as first studying individuals, then the collective, and initially focusing on the description and progressing to interpretation (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, 2010). Additionally, Smith (2004) suggests that the IPA process involves two stages of discovery and interpretation: 1) researchers are continually interpreting, analyzing, probing, seeking clarification, and taking notes during the interview, and 2) researchers read and reread their notes and the transcripts

to best interpret and explain the respondents' experiences. These principles and processes were adhered to in this study. Doing so required an immersive, iterative process of reading and reflecting on the notes and transcripts line by line to determine the respondents' thoughts and to understand their experiences (coding) as suggested by (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Emerging themes were developed by analyzing the codes, followed by studying the themes for connections. The resulting interpretations were then analyzed through an EMPYD lens.

Data were individually analyzed and coded by three researchers, and their notes were compared to determine commonalities and themes (Yin, 2016). To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, researchers well versed with MBC provided context while an outside view was provided by researchers not familiar with MBC (Cresswell 2013). Reliability was aided by asking MBC mentors if the findings seemed logical given MBC operations and procedures.

Results and Discussion

Employing an IPA, themes emerged from the focus group data that revealed how MBC aligns with the EMPYD model and empowers youth to succeed. MBC aligned with the characteristics of the EMPYD model by providing youth with opportunities to develop *mastery* (Figure 1, Model 1) and *moral identity* (Figure 1, Model 2) in addition to the Five Cs regularly associated with a PYD program. Interactions with a diverse set of mentors and peers allowed program participants to gain *mastery* of physical, social, and emotional skills. These connections also provided avenues for the development of empathy, *caring*, and *character*. MBC empowered its participants by fostering a sense of *community* that was dependable and consistent (Figure 1, Models 3 & 4). However, the data did not reveal how or if MBC empowers youth to participate in active and engaged *citizenship* (Figure 1, Model 5), especially citizenship concerned with racial or cultural identity.

Competence

Improving competency in bicycle riding is the first step in obtaining mastery of the activity. Improving skills to achieve new goals helps build transferable skills, which can be applied outside of the activity and help contribute to a stable transition from adolescence to adulthood (Travis & Leech, 2014; Lee et al., 2011). Program participants described their bicycle riding improvements in this way:

- *Yeah, because I didn't go up hills like that. I used to just go on straight, flat roads and back roads in apartment complexes and stuff, but now I started using the gears, because you can go up huge steep mountains.*
- *I was a beginner and now I am advanced.*

Bicycles also provides an avenue for social competency. Through participating in the MBC bike rides, participants improved their communication skills and how to work as a team with their peers and mentors as they established plans that helped them achieve their riding goals.

- *The first fastest three, we'll draft, we'll be like right behind each other and then the first person in the front, he gets tired, he'll wave his elbow and he'll get out the way and we'll go in front of him, and we'll just keep doing that.*
- *Me and my friend, we were doing a group project and then I just remember how the bike club communicates a lot, so I just decided to [inaudible 00:24:59] my friend so we can communicate more to finish the project and make it more better than usual.*

MBC youth also credit the mentors with helping them develop physical and emotional competencies. Mentors supervise program participants on a series of bike rides that take them to several locations in the community. The youth mentioned that during these rides their mentors teach them to be better riders and how to model respect and appreciation of the community:

- *Yeah. I think the mentors are pretty cool.... They give us motivation sometimes when we're going up steep hills.*
- *Interviewer: I think you said respect, didn't you? Somebody said respect.
Interviewee #1: Me.
Interviewer: Yeah. What did you mean by respect?
Interviewee #1: Your elders, I guess.
Interviewee #2: Like your surroundings around you. Like people around you. Things around you.
Interviewee #3 And work well with others.*

The MBC program is designed to facilitate conversations where values are discussed during the riding sessions. During stops for ice cream or tacos at partnering businesses or else to play games in a park, or during the rides themselves, mentors are able to model and discuss the right way to show respect to friends and strangers. Verbal communication skills were honed through both discussions and as the riders shared safety information during the ride. Group riding protocols require constant verbal and nonverbal (i.e., elbow wave) communication to ensure group safety.

The multiple layers of competence developed by the youth participants reveal a connection with the EMPYD model and the development of a *masterful community* (Figure 1, Model 4). MBC encourages the development of physical and social skills for both youth participants and adult mentors. Specifically, mentors encourage and conduct programs for youth to grow in their bicycling and social skills while the youth gain a sense of empowerment from their ability to master the skills and encourage the adult mentors to grow and improve. This is an example of positive bidirectional interactions between youth and their environments (Overton, 2015). The competence developed through *community* and *connection* indicates the presence of a *masterful community* that captures the synergy between *connection*, *confidence*, and *competence* (Travis & Leech, 2014).

Confidence

Developing competencies also helps youth feel a greater sense of *mastery*, which develops *confidence*. The MBC mentors role model and encourage a culture of *mastery*, evidenced by participants consistently observing that mentors are motivating, encouraging, and supportive. One program participant explained how she and her mentor provided mutual encouragement to one another:

- *At Paris Mountain, at first I didn't want to do it and she (mentor) didn't want to do it and we challenged each other and said, how about we both give it a try. and we did and we both made it up Paris Mountain.*

Program participants reported that MBC helped them improve their self-worth and confidence to manage and overcome obstacles and challenges:

- *Partnership and self-confidence, because when I started, I had like none. I hated me.*
- *Really, honestly, I learned my own strength, like I learned that I could push myself more than I thought I could. That I believe in myself. I know I keep on bringing this up, but I really learned to believe in myself.*

The diverse set of experiences also provides confidence to program participants that helps prepare them for the future:

- *Yeah, I mean we do a lot. It seems like every time I come we're doing something different. They do like, college counseling, they do job readiness, cooking classes, nutrition classes, bike maintenance, all different types of stuff, so ... They give us a well-rounded situation.*

As youth gain competency in bicycling, this confidence spills over into other areas of life. One youth expressed that the bicycle provided confidence in their ability to transport themselves despite the circumstances.

Another program participant observed that the bicycle gave them a sense of freedom that provided confidence to explore and expand their surroundings.

- *Say that your mom's car breaks down and she can't drive you after school—you can ride your bike instead of just waiting for somebody to fix her car.*
- *It helps me get out. It's transportation through the woods instead of walking, and I can go further, explore a bit more. And I can come back quicker because if I end up taking a break and take too long, I can still get back on time.*

Supportive mentors provide positive interactions that give youth the confidence to believe in themselves and encourage others. The mutual encouragement between youth and mentors reveals the empowering effect of MBC and how the program encourages youth to use their natural potential (Damon, 2004). The growth of personal confidence and exposure to diverse experiences also helps youth develop a sense of mastery over personality traits and adaptive techniques that aid their resilience against the harmful effects of negative emotions (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). MBC programming not only encourages confidence and mastery of the bicycle but also helps the youth to see the difference they can make in their world. By gaining a deeper understanding of their place within a community, youth have increased self-confidence with which to transcend challenging circumstances and be more resilient in daily struggles. The bicycle also acts as a mechanism of freedom and transportation that provides youth with confidence, and is an example of the EMPYD model being applied within a program using specialized recreation equipment.

Connection

The connections established by the program participants influence the development of *mastery* and *moral identity*. Program participants reported positive connections with MBC and were able to make connections through teamwork.

- *[I]t really made me happy inside. This is like my happy place.*
- *The first week I came I was nervous. I didn't know if everybody was going to like me or not, but then I found that, yeah, this was a teamwork thing and everybody worked together.*

MBC also fosters connections between supportive parents, peers, and mentors to provide youth with role models that exemplify a positive moral framework. This space allows youth to expand social networks, build social capital, and interact with new environments.

- *And then, on top of biking, having other people ride with you it adds a more social experience.*
- *My mom thought it was great I was spending time with friends and meeting new people and it gives me lots of new opportunities.*

Positive connections within the program are primarily established through relationships with fellow participants and adult mentors. *Connections* with mentors provided youth with opportunities for *mastery* by improving *confidence* and *competency*. These relationships also provided supportive communities and secure attachments that foster the development of a *moral identity* of *caring* and *character* (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2011). Program participants described their mentors as friends or members of their own family even given the age difference:

- *It's not like a parent figure. It's somebody you can confide in, a friend you can talk to, a regular friend*
- *They're like family to me, but like they'll listen and they'll ... Just there for you, you know:*
- *More of a friendship level than an older person to a younger person. So, like you still have that boundary there but you can...more friends than older person to younger person.*

Connection is the lynchpin of the EMPYD model, see Figure 1. MBC provides a model example of how recreational activity, specifically bicycling, can be used to foster *connections* that empower youth to develop a sense of *mastery* and *moral identity*. The atmosphere of support and teamwork within MBC creates the expectation that everyone in the program is growing and improving together. MBC provides a supportive and challenging environment that is necessary to empower youth to grow in all aspects of their lives (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Succeeding together helps the youth achieve beyond their expectations. As they grow in *mastery* within their *community*, the *connections* they establish further provide support to help youth reevaluate their personal potential and their potential to influence others around them (Damon, 2004).

The connections made through MBC also influence the development of a *moral identity*. Consistent exposure to supportive and caring adults provides models for behavior and community engagement. The development of close personal relationships with mentors and peers within the program creates space for program participants to develop empathy for others and an understanding of others' backgrounds (Li et al., 2018). Youth and mentors learn of each others' life experiences, providing a deeper context for understanding personal and systematic struggles.

Varied and diverse connections established within MBC provide youth with an opportunity to develop a critical consciousness that helps them understand their place within a diverse world. Critical consciousness is the ability of a person to analyze oppressive social forces and act against them (Diemer et al., 2016). These connections have the potential to empower youth to develop this consciousness and make positive contributions to their community. The MBC program participants did not specifically mention that their relationships with mentors grew to this level. However, there is potential for MBC to encourage and focus on building direct connections that encourage critical consciousness.

Character

MBC mentors challenge program participants to evaluate their actions and behaviors and to take personal responsibility for their own growth. One program participant identified character development as the primary purpose of MBC:

- *To become a better person, teamwork, and to build your character. That's what I think.*

Mentors help model this positive character through their interactions with youth during bicycle rides and events. For example, one participant detailed how patient their mentor was with them:

- *Like say you're doing a ride—he won't rush you. He'll teach you what to do, like look back and forth, be safe. If he's a little bit upset, he won't go to the extreme. He'll talk it out with you, like, "Are you fine with this?" Things like that.*

Another program participant mentioned that their mentor is joyful but serious at the same time:

- *Mr. David, he's one of those people that like, if you ... He's a happy, funny ... He'll sit there and, you know, tell jokes and stuff. But, like, he can also get serious, and if you need help, he'll find a way to get you help.*

MBC provides avenues for youth to assess their attitudes toward societal and cultural rules, appropriate behavior, personal integrity, and the difference between right and wrong, which Travis and Leech (2014) suggest is important to build character. Through fostering positive relational connections and exposing youth to diverse experiences, MBC allows youth to make their own decisions and prioritize personal growth. One program participant described the influence of MBC as follows:

- *MBC is more interesting, not just focused on one thing, and I feel like bike club is more personal. More ... self-building.*

MBC exemplifies characteristics of the EMPYD model by focusing on the development of more than physical skills, which encourages personal character growth. MBC provides opportunities for empowerment through discussions and reflections that encourage program participants to engage in moral reasoning, in determining what is right and wrong from a moral perspective (Malti et al., 2014; Frankfurt, 1998). Mentors and youth participate as a group to encourage diverse discussion and connection. Through these conversations, youth are able to observe the character of their mentors and gain models for future behavior.

Caring

The mentor/mentee relationship provides insight into the recursive nature of *moral identity* development. Program participants perceive their mentors as caring and respectful, which encourages youth to respond to mentors and fosters character development. When mentors support and connect with youth beyond the program, it shows the participants that their mentors care about them.

- *Yeah. And they extend their relationship outside of the program. It's not just like, you come here and you see them. They're supporting you outside the program.*

The youth described their mentors as helpful, honest, trustworthy, motivating, and treating them like adults. These mentor/mentee relationships foster empathy in both parties. As youth and mentors make connections, they become more aware of each others' experiences and learn to treat each other as equals. These relationships create a space for in-depth conversations and mutual respect. A program participant described their mentor's approach to caring as follows:

- *So it's more like constructive criticism, and they put themselves on the same level as us instead of like treating us like children. They give us a certain level of respect.*

The positive and caring relationships between youth and nonparental adults within the MBC program create space for youth to expand their empathy and caring across multiple aspects of life. MBC provides youth with opportunities to increase their empathy and caring by learning from the experiences of program mentors and modeling positive behavior (Johnson et al., 2016). Youth learn to be aware of others' experiences and how to respond appropriately to those experiences (Weiler et al., 2014). The connections established within MBC empower youth with the tools to display empathetic behavior to others outside of the program. MBC's focus on establishing positive, caring relationships and having youth examine their moral identities provides an example of how to establish a programmatic moral community (Figure 1, Model 3).

Community

Developing a sense of *community* involves finding a sense of membership within dependable and supportive structures (Evans, 2007). By facilitating *mastery* and *moral identity* development consistently and dependably, MBC empowers its participants to improve their sense of personal and community well-being. One program participant attributes their interactions with a diverse set of mentors as a reason for the supportive community environment established within MBC.

- *I like that it's not just one from each group in the mentors. Some are older than others. Some are younger. So, like, even the kids that are different ages. You don't have just one specific group. You have a whole bunch of different people.*

The connections made through MBC programming allow participants to learn shared communal values in a safe and dependable environment. Consistent positive interactions with mentors and peers provide youth with structure to develop a *moral identity*.

- *It's like real fun to have older people riding with us. That's really what it is. It's just getting to know a lot of people that you never met before. It's funny 'cuz like mentors are taking their time out of their day just to come ride with some kids.*
- *What would I miss [if bike club went away]? The laughter, the family, friends. All the group bonding and just being around people.*

MBC programs promote belonging, mastery, independence, and a positive moral identity that establishes a mutually beneficial environment for program participants, staff, and volunteers. MBC empowers youth to achieve and succeed by utilizing their natural potential and assets. However, MBC does not fit strictly within the EMPYD model. While MBC empowers youth to succeed, the data did not find that MBC empowered participants to understand their place within the racial and socioeconomic realities of their community. The *community* discussed in Travis & Leech's (2014) EMPYD model sees an empowered *community* as one where adolescents develop the "consciousness, skills and power necessary to envision personal or collective well-being and understand their role within opportunities to transform social conditions to achieve that well-being" (Travis, 2013). To fully fit within the EMPYD model, programs must directly address racial and social realities and injustices within communities and empower youth to address or overcome these barriers. As MBC progresses in its program development, it should look to add aspects that help empower youth in this way.

Citizenship

Active and engaged *citizenship* within the EMPYD model is intentionally concerned with empowering youth to address racial and social injustice to create a better and fairer society. The model establishes *citizenship* as a multidimensional asset concerned with civic duty, skills, connection, and participation (Travis & Leech, 2014). Themes about engaged citizenship, resistance to oppression, or opportunities for social change did not emerge from the data. However, data revealed that MBC programming influenced youth participants' *moral identity* and their sense of responsibility to their MBC community:

- *If [I] wasn't here, I'd be my old self. Doing nothing, being disrespectful, doing bad things, probably bigger, and probably more lazier.*
- *I'd be doing bad things right about now. I promise you. I wouldn't even be a person, like who I am right now.*
- *We'll stay behind for somebody to make sure they are doing okay so they won't fall off or go off the track or something like that, especially if they're like a newbie.*
- *It gives you more, gives you a sense of responsibility. You've gotta be responsible for everybody, not only the people in front of you but who's behind you, too.*
- *Yeah, I actually go outside now and actually start talking to the neighbors.*

The data did not capture if MBC encourages youth to explore their racial, cultural, or community identity or how mentors of similar racial backgrounds could influence racial socialization in program participants. Youth were asked if the race of their mentor mattered, and the response was a resounding no. The program participants discussed that what was important to them was the fact that their mentors were able to be engaged and that they were trying to help them grow:

- *But the race doesn't matter, because what matters is that they're still trying to help us.*
- *It don't matter, as long as you're a cool dude, it don't matter.*
- *It's who you are as a person.*

While these findings provide context that mentors and the structure of MBC facilitate a positive sense of community within MBC, they do not reveal if MBC empowers racial or cultural civic engagement through the mentor/mentee relationship. MBC did not organize its program around the EMPYD model. However, analyzing the participants' focus group data revealed that MBC possesses many aspects of the EMPYD model and is empowering its youth to grow in their *mastery* and in their *moral reasoning*. With a few intentional changes, MBC could further align with the EMPYD model by providing youth with specific and culturally relevant opportunities for active and engaged *citizenship*.

Management Implications

MBC is an example of a PYD program that empowers youth through the establishment of *masterful* and *moral communities*. MBC provides youth participants a consistent group of caring adult mentors who facilitate the connections necessary to help youth grow in *confidence*, *competence*, *character*, and *caring*. The mentors are nonparental adults who guide youth through a variety of recreational and educational activities, a weekly bike ride being the centerpiece. For example, a ride typically includes stops at parks or other green spaces, where outdoor activities/games are played and healthy snacks are consumed. Topics discussed intentionally include contemporary issues facing youth, these discussions aimed at helping youth adopt a healthier lifestyle. Additionally, youth-mentor conversations organically occur, generally and ideally centering around issues introduced by the youth.

This program is effective because of the mentors' ability to connect with youth, encourage youth, and guide youth through programs. The bicycle is the medium that facilitates the connection, as it is a common interest for bidirectional relationships and community building. Through group rides and the accompanying bike maintenance sessions, youth and mentors improve their mastery of the bicycle and build community as they work together to set and achieve riding and maintenance goals. Group riding requires a great deal of communication to ensure the group members' safety, which reinforces shared communal values. Additionally, the group rides allow the youth to expand their community as they visit areas and people outside of their daily routines.

These bicycle activities foster a variety of discussions not related to bicycling, such as personal decision-making, which can lead to deeper conversations that help youth examine their *moral identities*. While bicycling may not be appropriate for all youth development programs, program leaders can learn from the example of MBC on how to better facilitate connections between youth and adults through intentional program design. Each bike ride, bicycle maintenance lesson, safe riding session, and healthy lifestyle discussion is designed to intentionally engage youth based on the PYD philosophy and allows for consistent skill improvement.

Nonbicycle-oriented programs can translate MBC efforts at building *mastery* and *moral communities* using their mediums to connect to students. For example, *mastery* can be nurtured by focusing on developing a specific skill or practice that will enhance *confidence* and *competence* in youth. Instead of learning to fix bike tires, a 4-H STEM program could provide youth with opportunities to master a specific component of robotics or computer science. A local scout troop leader can provide opportunities for members to master a specific knot or outdoor skill. *Moral Identity* can be fostered by giving youth decision-making power in an activity that creates opportunities to care for others and examine their own *character*. The leader of a high school basketball team could consider having their team provide a weekend clinic for young players and then have intentional time to discuss what the experience meant to each of the high school players. Faith-based youth leaders can organize projects with local charities to serve the community and foster discussion about community needs and injustice. Utilizing the EMPYD model, practitioners can learn from MBC programs and implement activities and events that specifically focus on supporting *masterful* and *moral communities* whose members are empowered to become active and *engaged* citizens.

After data was collected for this study, MBC launched a program called Artistically Reshaping Trauma + Circles, which helps minority youth understand and overcome racial trauma through a variety of art forms, including music, poetry, and fine arts. Organized by a graduate student, this eight-week, resource-intensive program connects numerous established regional BIPOC artists, trained mentors, and university faculty who study race and racism with high school-age youth. Racism's origins, methods, and effects are discussed, personal experiences are shared, and the artists teach youth how to express themselves through various art forms. Additionally, youth are taught to identify their capacity to enact social change. Artistically Reshaping Trauma + Circles is the first MBC program to encourage a broader level of citizenship.

Limitations and Future Research

This project did not delineate responses based on ethnicity, gender, or age. While the vast majority of respondents were members of an MBC club and so of middle school age, some respondents were members of a Challenge Team, and thus of high school age. It is possible that delineating responses by ethnicity, gender, and age might provide more nuanced responses and insight into MBC efforts to employ an EMPYD.

The EMPYD framework was used as a lens to evaluate an existing PYD program, one not designed around

the EMPYD framework. Therefore, the EMPYD framework could not be tested, and some components, such as citizenship, were not as prevalent in the data as the EMPYD model would suggest they should be. Although MBC was not designed around the EMPYD framework, it exhibited many EMPYD aspects.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to view the EMPYD framework through an actual program, and it provides the groundwork for three specific ideas that could progress the literature and our understanding of the EMPYD model and its effectiveness. First, it could be fruitful to develop and conduct an EMPYD program and study its effectiveness longitudinally. This data could be useful in determining if the framework is effective and what specific program details lead to empowerment. Second, the original EMPYD framework was designed to empower Black youth. This study found that youth from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds were empowered. Studying the EMPYD framework in racially heterogeneous communities would provide deeper insight into the framework's ability to empower a diverse population of youth. Third, while the current study takes a qualitative approach, future research should examine the EMPYD framework through quantitative methods such as regression analysis or structural equation modeling. The recursive nature of the EMPYD framework provides fertile ground to examine the latent relationships between the Five Cs and the establishment of *moral* and *mastery communities* as well as the relationships between the development of the Five Cs and the development of *community* and active and engaged *citizenship*. Lastly, there is also a need to compare the EMPYD framework to other youth empowerment models, such as the one proposed by Clonan-Roy, Jacobs, and Nakkula (2016), which suggests that supporting youth in developing critical consciousness is a key to their empowerment.

Conclusion

The EMPYD framework is a modification of the classic Five Cs PYD framework that identifies culturally specific strengths to empower youth of color. Through the creation of *moral* and *masterful communities*, the EMPYD framework proposes that youth will be empowered with the culturally specific knowledge to participate in active and engaged *citizenship* that helps address systematic inequalities within their *community*. MBC represents a programmatic model that uses many aspects of the EMPYD framework to empower youth from a variety of backgrounds. MBC programs provide youth the opportunity to develop mastery of safe bicycling and to develop their moral reasoning through relationships with adult mentors. Examining MBC through the lens of the EMPYD framework revealed that with a little tweaking the program can further empower youth by providing intentional programming that focuses on culturally specific *community* building and by providing program participants with the opportunity to engage in culturally specific *citizenship*.

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