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Impacts of State 4-H Council Service: A Phenomenological Study

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This qualitative study explored the experience of youth serving on the state 4-H council of Missouri, which provides opportunities to serve as ambassadors of the 4-H organization and influence the experiences of younger members. While many 4-H programs have a statewide youth council, there is little research regarding these groups or the impacts of state 4-H council service. This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the impacts of State 4-H Council service among alumni within a framework of positive youth development theory. Council service was found to have provided members experience in working with diverse others, created opportunities to expand relational networks, influenced individual actions, and affected changes in both individuals and their contexts.

Keywords: youth councils, state 4-H council, youth leadership, positive youth development

Introduction

Growth potential is unparalleled during adolescence, and prepared leaders must be able to build connections with diverse others in a dynamically changing world. As globalization and technology connect individuals across cultural and geographic boundaries, cultural competency skills are needed for a successful transition to young adulthood. However, these opportunities can be elusive for teens growing up in monocultural communities as they seek to be prepared for the adult world. Through 4-H, Cooperative Extension provides opportunities for youth to grow and connect with a larger community, build peer networks, and develop competencies as they explore their interests.

One such opportunity is service on a state 4-H council, which generally offers opportunities to serve as ambassadors, program co-planners, and a voice of youth at the state level. Those who serve on a state 4-H council can have unique impacts on the youth, programming, and image of their state 4-H program. However, despite being a capstone of the intensity, duration, and breadth that characterizes an engaged 4-H experience (Arnold, 2018; Bruce et al., 2005), service on a state 4-H council remains an understudied 4-H opportunity. Therefore, this study examined the experience of state 4-H council service in the Missouri 4-H program. For this article, the term *State 4-H Council* will be capitalized only when referring to the Missouri body specifically.

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Contemporary youth development research has increasingly moved beyond a focus on individual variables alone and focused greater attention on individual-context relationships (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2012; Youngblade & Theokas, 2006). 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 et al., 2011). The PYD approach emphasizes the potential of all youth for positive life trajectories, closely examines the relationship between the young person and their contexts, and focuses on youth attainment of a thriving orientation in which the young person and context are both enriched by their association (Arnold, 2018; Lerner et al., 2011; Scales et al., 2011). For this study, the term *context* is defined as the peers, adults, and systems surrounding the individual youth.

Previous Studies

Before 2020, only three published studies (Boleman et al., 2008; Bruce et al., 2004, 2005) examined this experience specifically (Bruce, 2003; Leech, 2007). However, a small but growing body of contemporary research has begun to explore state 4-H council service regarding leadership life skill development and youth perceptions of their experience (Anderson, 2020; Kelsey, 2020; Kelsey & Fuhrman, 2020). Together, these studies suggest that serving on a state 4-H council can be valuable to the development of youth, enhancing career readiness, leadership, and life skills, and building important peer relationships with other council members. In addition, state 4-H council service has been shown to develop leadership competencies that include decision making, communication, respect for others, working effectively with others (Boleman et al., 2008; Bruce et al., 2004; Kelsey, 2020; Kelsey & Fuhrman, 2020; Moran et al., 2019), and self-esteem (Boleman et al., 2008).

Beyond state councils, a growing body of research points to positive impacts for teens who experience developmental opportunities for greater responsibility. Studies on overnight camping models suggest that teen leadership experience can foster self-efficacy, impact college choice, advance relationship-building skills, and develop leadership skills that include responsibility, organization, and public speaking (Bird & Subramaniam, 2018; Richmond et al., 2019; Whittington & Garst, 2018; Worker et al., 2019). This research also suggests that camp leadership experience may indirectly facilitate a wide range of college readiness skills (Whittington & Garst, 2018). Adolescents engaged in cross-age teaching programs reported greater confidence in leading groups and engaging with others (Worker et al., 2019), building strong connections with their campers, growing perceptions of themselves as role models, and new abilities to work with others different from themselves (Bird & Subramaniam, 2018).

The Present Study

This study contributes to the body of literature by examining the state 4-H council experience in-depth, exploring the impacts of membership on Missouri's State 4-H Council through two research questions:

- 1) How did State 4-H Council service impact individuals?
- 2) How did State 4-H Council service impact youth contexts?

Underlying the State 4-H Council experience at the time of the study were two structural elements: (a) the Code of Conduct and (b) event planning responsibilities for two statewide 4-H events. The Code of Conduct was an agreement signed by all State 4-H Council members at the beginning of each year, stipulating that they would 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.

Event planning duties focused on two state 4-H events, Teen Conference and State 4-H Congress. Teen Conference was a leadership development experience designed to foster belonging, independence, mastery, and generosity in youth ages 11-13, while State 4-H Congress focused on college and career readiness and served ages 14-18. State 4-H Council members worked to design, implement, and evaluate these events, working in committees to address component tasks with the guidance of adult advisors.

Approach

This study was conducted through the lens of PYD, using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Developed during the 1930s by Martin Heidegger, hermeneutic phenomenology embraces the goal of *understanding* human experience by engaging the researcher's own knowledge and experience of the phenomena, rather than attempting to constrain those existing understandings, to objectively *describe* the phenomena as Husserl's original descriptive phenomenology would prescribe. This approach is particularly useful in examining highly contextualized experiences; the researcher's own knowledge of the experience is leveraged to interpret the data with a deeper level of understanding throughout the research process (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009; Koch, 1999; Rossman & Rallis, 2016).

The most widely used criteria for assessing the validity of qualitative research is *trustworthiness*, a term coined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to indicate the data support an argument that the inquiry's findings are "worth paying attention to" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 2). As the hermeneutic phenomenological approach engages the knowledge and experience of the researcher, the trustworthiness of the data is tied directly to that of the researcher who collects and analyzes that data (Patton, 1999). For this reason, it is critically important for the researcher to remain self-aware of the role that their biases and assumptions play (Crist & Tanner, 2003) in interpreting the data.

Methods

The sample for this study was comprised of 15 individuals who had served on the State 4-H Council during the 2011-2013 timeframe. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval,

sample members were recruited through a purposive sampling technique due to the highly contextualized conditions of this study, and data collection took place through individual semi-structured interviews. Members were in their mid-20s and hailed from rural areas, small towns, metropolitan suburbs, and large cities. One male and one female member of the sample were black, and thirteen were white, with seven males and eight females.

After data were collected and transcribed, analysis aligned with the established *hermeneutic circle* process developed by Heidegger and further refined by Gadamer (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This process provides a lens for understanding the shared experience of the sample by examining both smaller and larger units of meaning. Data analysis began with an open coding process, identifying and recording the larger, more holistic themes from each transcript. Next, individual experience-based statements or phrases were identified throughout the transcript, assigning and recording a code for each element. An abstraction process followed, refining contextual concepts and their elements that overlapped or were related.

To foster self-awareness and account for biases, the researcher engaged in standard qualitative practices of further clarifying his interviews and settings during data collection (Groenewald, 2004), which included reflective memos and written field notes. These field notes included observations of participant data that would not be captured in an audio interview but conveyed meaning regarding the experience of the interviewees. Examples of these observations 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; Laverly, 2003).

Results

Data analysis yielded six themes that informed the research questions. The individual impacts of State 4-H Council service were addressed in the themes of *Encountering Diversity*, *Growth from Autonomy*, *Heightened Self-Awareness*, and *View of Self as a Leader*. The question of how this service impacted the contexts of members was addressed by the themes of *Validation from Adults*, *Recognition from Peers*, and *Broadening Networks*. In the spirit of phenomenology, quotes from the interviews are enlisted below, driving the narrative through the shared experiences of the sample members themselves. All individuals are identified by pseudonyms.

Research Question 1: How did State 4-H Council service impact individuals?

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

Growth from Diversity

For a large portion of the sample, statewide 4-H events presented their first exposure to other youth of differing races and cultures. The opportunity to serve on the State 4-H Council was often their first experience in working with diverse peers on common goals over a period of time. Semi-structured interviews provided insights into the experience of this transition.

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 rural youth shared similar backgrounds, entry onto the State 4-H Council was something of a culture shock for non-white urban youth. “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 for which their context of origin had not prepared them. 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 ... I guess that was the most eye-opening or surprising thing. Just how different life is everywhere else.

Establishing Connections. As newly-elected members from rural areas prepared to assume their State 4-H Council roles, several in the sample recalled that anxiety was not uncommon. “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. However, despite any cross-cultural deficits afforded by monocultural origins, members reported moving forward as they joined the State 4-H Council and becoming acquainted with their peers as they began working in groups and on projects.

Members with broader multicultural experience became leaders in establishing communication structures needed for effectiveness. “One thing I think that really helped catalyze that is our (African-American) Reps that we did have on the Lincoln University side,” said Johnny, “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.’”

Through their duties in planning and facilitating two state 4-H events, Council members were put in a position of working towards common goals. Masoud recalled his observation that this work helped move new members from a condition of limited cultural competence to an environment of engagement:

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 we also can have a little bit of fun while we're here. ... It taught me 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.

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 –not those of race or ethnicity – created the greatest divide. Masoud recalled,

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

Grace, a white female from the same city as Masoud, described an encounter with an older member from a rural community early in her Council tenure:

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. ... 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.

Personality Styles. As Council members built cultural competencies working alongside peers of other cultures and races, they also learned to navigate diverse personalities as they began their Council tenure. Echoing another study of state 4-H council members (Bruce et al., 2004), sample members reported that training in personality styles played a foundational role in becoming effective leaders. Reflecting on this, Grace shared,

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 at the front and 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.

Growth from Autonomy

While Council members shared a set of assumptions about the responsibilities and expectations of their role, they also enjoyed individual autonomy in how they defined it. As Ridley described,

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 ... [but] 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 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’s focus involved her impact on younger 4-H members. “Our role was to be a role model to Missouri 4-H’ers everywhere... We brought ideas to the table,” she said. Reflecting on the balance between structured expectations and individuality, Jackson observed, “I feel like they shared the same vision. They might go about it differently because there’s multiple ways to do the same task, multiple roads to get to one place.”

The flexibility to define one’s role within set parameters contributed to a sense of shared ownership among Council members. “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,” said Ridley. “Each of us had a different role really, because it was ours to create.” The sense of community and commitment created safe space and motivation for members to try new roles and grow in new directions. 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 [*sic*] 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 ... because I wouldn’t have never [*sic*] got out of that mode of following somebody. I would have always been the sheep.

Heightened Self-Awareness

With these normative assumptions in place, a shared sense of ownership and responsibility brought a heightened self-awareness that extended to decision-making in their home communities. This was true among sample members, regardless of the level of 4-H influence within these individual contexts. As Jackson described,

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, it's "okay, that's just a little kid being an idiot." But if a Council kid does something, [it's] "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 ... They expect you to be a kid because you're a teenager, but they expected you to be one of the elite.

"I think I had to hold myself to a higher standard because people were looking up to me," said Rebecca, 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."

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, shared that his Council role made him more proactive and mindful of his actions. Recounting how State 4-H Council membership impacted how he spent time in his hometown, Sorrel shared,

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. 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, so I'm just going to go home."

View of Oneself as a Leader

The sample shared that one key impact of State 4-H Council membership was an evolving view of themselves as leaders. Taraji, a Council member representing Lincoln University 4-H, spoke to this growth process and the bi-directional relationship between leaders 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 [*sic*] 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."

Reflecting on Council membership, Rebecca 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."

Mary recalled being on Council as a strong motivator:

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.

Research Question 2: How did State 4-H Council service impact youth contexts?

State 4-H Council membership led to changes in sample members' relationships with the youth and adults in their contexts due to engagement in their State 4-H Council role. Three contextual changes reported by the sample included validation from adults, recognition from their peers, and broadened networks.

Validation from Adults

All members of the sample described increased levels of validation from the adults in their contexts. “I think adults viewed me a little bit different,” said Masoud, “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.” Noting that 4-H involvement was uncommon in his urban environment, Masoud added, “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 Rebecca. “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 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 Brock. “I think that the way they saw us might have transitioned from just *kids* to *young adults*.”

Recognition from Peers

While the levels of 4-H dosage did not appear to strongly influence individual changes (i.e., heightened self-awareness), these levels did play a role in the responses new members received from those in their contexts.

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!’” Randall, whose family and circle of friends were highly steeped in the local 4-H program, recalled his first 4-H club meeting after being elected to Council. “When I came back with that (green) jacket ... I came back with a lot more respect from other kids.” He also described being asked with sudden frequency by his 4-H adults for input on activities in 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.” This lack of recognition in low dosage communities 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 country school, she contrasted her experience with attention 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.” Johnny, who enjoyed validation from school administrators for his 4-H activities, recalled that peer recognition was fleeting. “It was 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?’”

Broadened Networks

Meaningful relationships are typically co-constructed in adolescence, resulting in a shared experience of feeling trusted, supported, and safe (Hopper et al., 2019, p. 3). With a greater understanding of the personalities around them, shared commitment, and experience working together towards shared goals, members built important connections across differing backgrounds and ideologies. Members of the sample largely described feelings of bondedness with other Council alumni they served with and described lasting networks as a result of their State 4-H Council experience. At one extreme of this range were Brock and Rebeccah, who met on State 4-H Council six years prior and were two weeks from their wedding at the time of data collection. At the other was Annabeth, who no longer felt a strong connection to the group.

As Council members worked together over time, they began to expect a long-term connection that they believed was characteristic of Councils before them. In reality, most members of the remaining sample were no longer in regular communication but shared strong expectations that continued support from their former peers would be present if the need arose. All had left the State 4-H Council experience with this expectation of lifelong supportive connections in place and characterized the relationships between members as *family-like*. Ridley shared,

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 strength of this expectation is also reflected by the one sample member who reported feeling that her Council relationships had not followed her in life. Theories of social capital suggest that access to these relationships must be maintained in order to preserve the resources those relationships provide (Augsberger et al., 2018), and this member voiced disappointment in the disconnect between her expectations of these relationships and her experience:

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 ... 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. [emphasis added]

Discussion and Implications

These findings are consistent with past research on the impacts of state 4-H council service, expanded leadership roles, and models within and beyond PYD. Most 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. The requirement to move forward and work together on important tasks provided opportunities for many in the sample to build meaningful relationships around shared goals with others who were not part of their typical peer group, rather than focusing on their differences. Ultimately, these individuals found a sense of belonging to an important and more diverse group, built relationships with peers, and experienced being recognized for their accomplishments. Over time they internalized expectations of their role, further regulated their own behavior, and experienced greater self-awareness of their influence on younger youth.

In describing consumer behavior, economic sociologist Mark 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). In the case of the State 4-H Council, the sample provided several examples of how their individual actions were impacted by their close interactive relationships with other members, who they believed shared their assumptions. These included expected standards of behavior, shared goals and vision, a group-wide sense of belonging, and the belief that they could pursue and achieve significant goals in terms of their own unique strengths.

Within contemporary PYD literature, Arnold's (2018) 4-H thriving model identifies elements of the 4-H developmental context that include fostering developmental relationships, facilitating youth sparks, promoting youth engagement, and following principles for high-quality youth development programs (Arnold & Gagnon, 2020, p. 8). These elements were reflected in sample members' descriptions of autonomy in defining their roles, feelings of belonging, strengthened youth-adult partnerships, and intentionality in avoiding trouble that would impact their status as a Council member. These findings also reflect the model's indicators of youth thriving: openness to challenge and discovery, growth mindset, hopeful purpose, pro-social orientation, and transcendent awareness (Arnold & Gandy, 2019). The question of whether the State 4-H Council experience-oriented members towards a thriving trajectory or simply complimented an existing orientation is beyond the scope of this study. Future research should examine state 4-H councils as developmental contexts, examining key elements and youth thriving indicators within each member's council tenure and larger 4-H experience.

Conclusion

The relationship between individual and context is dynamic (Lerner, 2011), with neither existing in a vacuum. Sample members' Council context was characterized by common rules and high expectations, individual autonomy, and a shared commitment to the purpose of their roles. Their growth and development as individuals were influenced by exposure to diversity, competency training, leadership experiences, and the opportunities to work with diverse others over time to make impactful decisions. The sample reported that their views of themselves and the larger world changed through the State 4-H Council experience. Through individual actions, personal growth, and the status of their association, members found themselves treated differently by the adults and peers in their surrounding contexts, which in turn affected how they viewed themselves as individuals. By being treated by adults as leaders and valued resources, invited to engage in opportunities associated with these roles, and lauded as role models, sample members came to view themselves as leaders with substantial creative capacity.

While previous studies did not include a discussion of diversity, this study suggests that cultural capacity building and exposure to diversity resonated with the sample as extremely valuable aspects of their State 4-H Council experience. 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. 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.

To harness the advantages of diversity, which was identified as a key asset by the sample in this study, some additional structural factors must be in place. For example, 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 the Land Grant University's 4-H program.

While hermeneutic phenomenology is more commonly applied in nursing research, this approach contributed strongly to the value of this study by allowing the insights of a practitioner-researcher in interpreting a highly contextualized State 4-H Council experience. With proper rigor, practitioner-researchers in youth-serving organizations should consider this approach as a viable means of utilizing their experience and knowledge to further the field of youth development.

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