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## The Contribution of Urban 4-H to Social Capital and the Implications for Social Justice

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## The Contribution of Urban 4-H to Social Capital and the Implications for Social Justice

### Abstract

The idea that equal education exists in the United States is a misconception, and positive youth development programs are a proposed response to inequitable education. Youth development programs have the potential to increase one's social capital, particularly for youths who are marginalized by inequitable access to quality education. The study described here focused on the contribution of urban positive youth development to social capital and social justice. Findings indicate that 4-H initiatives related to social capital are reaching marginalized youths. However, barriers are preventing 4-H from reaching these youths adequately and/or consistently.

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## Introduction and Background

Education is a basic human need—it is a means to and an exercise of one's freedom. A meaningful education empowers people to claim their humanity, liberate their people, and work toward social justice (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Throughout U.S. history, there has been inequitable access to quality education for people of color, an inequity that is a form of social injustice (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kober & Usher, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Perry et al., 2003).

Inequities with respect to accessing social capital also exist. That is, access to social capital is "not equally available to all members of society of a given community" (Calvert, Emery, & Kinsey, 2013, p. 5). More specifically, some youths lack the social capital necessary to thrive in future careers and through adulthood (Calvert et al., 2013). It can be argued that part of what makes an educational experience inequitable *is* limited access to social capital (Fields, 2016). Young people gain access to a multitude of opportunities, experiences, and forms of support in the areas of education, jobs, and careers through ties and connections formed in the development of social capital (Multi-State Research Project NCERA215, 2015). In communities where young people have limited access to mentors, networks, engaged school faculty, and new experiences—all of which are forms of social capital—their educational experience may not be as rich (Catts & Ozga, 2005; Perry et al., 2003). Putnam (2000) asserted that "in areas where social capital is lacking, the effects of poverty . . . are magnified,

making life much worse for children and adults alike" (p. 317).

There have been many proposed responses to the problems of inequitable education, one of which is positive youth development (Calvert et al., 2013; Erbstein, 2013; Fields & Nathaniel, 2015b; Perry et al., 2003). Positive youth development programs have the potential to increase one's social capital, particularly for youths who are marginalized by inequitable access to quality education (Erbstein, 2013; Fields & Nathaniel, 2015b; Williams & LeMenestrel, 2013).

## Purpose and Research Goals

For the qualitative study described here, I focused on the contribution of positive youth development to social capital and the implications for social justice. More specifically, I investigated urban 4-H youth development educator perspectives on programs and practices that serve marginalized youths to determine the extent to which their practices aligned with a social capital framework. My goals were to better understand urban 4-H educators' perspectives of their programs and practices that serve marginalized youths, to determine how these perspectives fit in a social capital framework, and to identify themes that may lead to the operationalization of effective practices that foster 4-H social capital and social justice outcomes.

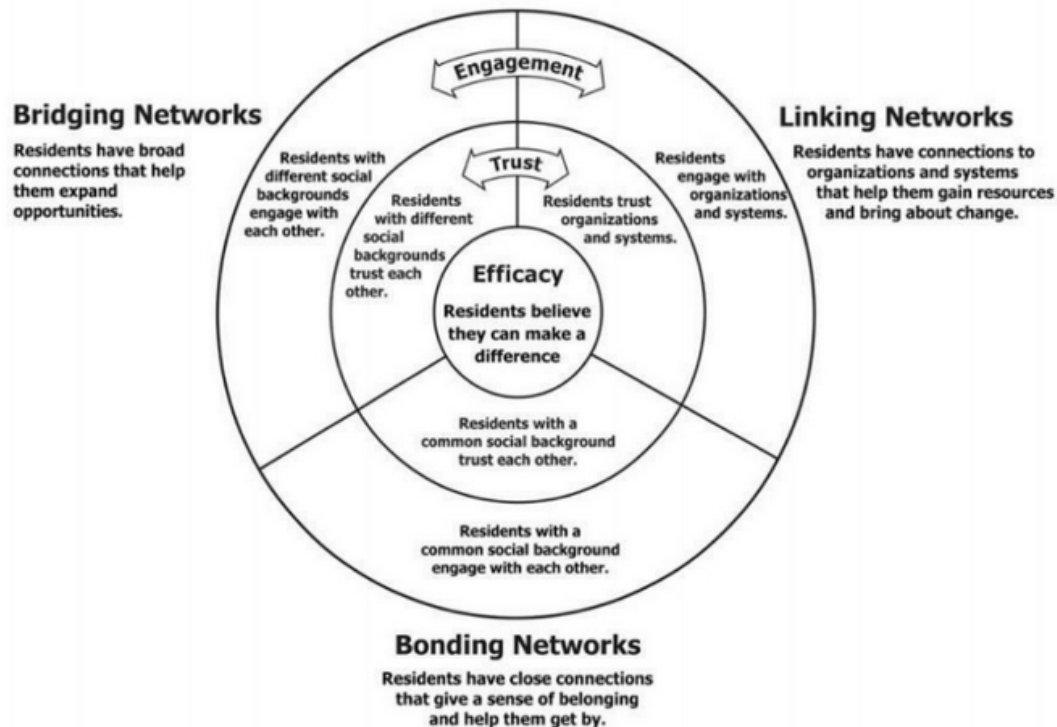
## Conceptual Framework and Related Literature

A social capital conceptual framework guided the study (Bourdieu, 1986; Calvert et al., 2013; Putnam, 2000; Yosso, 2006). Social capital can be described in many ways, yet the major premise remains the same—that is, social capital is the network of relationships and resources that empowers community members to solve problems together (Bourdieu, 1986; Catts & Ozga, 2005; Chazdon, Allen, Horntvedt, & Scheffert, 2013; Yosso, 2006). Relative to the work described herein, networks can represent new relationships and connections that serve as a bridge or link to enhanced life skills and opportunities. Empowerment to solve problems together can represent the community advantages of having increased youth civic and community engagement stemming from positive youth development programs. A social capital framework that is ingrained in positive youth development programs can create educational experiences that improve meaningful learning outcomes of youths and serve as a means to social justice (Calvert et al., 2013; Fields & Nathaniel, 2015a).

Scheffert, Horntvedt, and Chazdon (2009) described the conditions of social capital to be inclusive of trust, engagement, networks, and efficacy (or agency) (Figure 1). These conditions guided the direction of the research questions, interview questions, and data analysis described herein.

### Figure 1.

University of Minnesota Social Capital Educational Model



*Note.* From "Developing and validating of a University of Minnesota Extension's Social Capital Model and Survey," by S. Chazdon, R. P. Allen, J. Horntvedt, and D. R. Scheffert, 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.extension.umn.edu/community/research/docs/Validating-Social-Capital-Report.pdf>. Copyright 2013 by University of Minnesota. Reprinted with permission.

## 4-H Positive Youth Development

4-H is the youth development program of the Cooperative Extension System of land-grant universities and is "the nation's largest youth development organization, empowering six million young people throughout the United States" (National 4-H Council, 2015, para 2). Researchers and practitioners have identified various frameworks to define and guide the design and structure of youth development programs. 4-H youth development is rooted in the foundational frameworks of the 4-H essential elements model (Martz, Mincemoyer, & McNeely, 2009), the experiential learning model, and the five Cs of positive youth development (Lerner, 2005). These models all have components that connect to or lead to outcomes of social capital (see Figures 2 and 3 and Table 3).

## Social Justice Youth Development

Brown (2004) asserted that there is a need for educators to "retool their teaching and courses to address issues of power and privilege—to weave social justice into the fabric of educational leadership curriculum, pedagogy, programs and policies" (p. 78). In fact, she stated that educational leaders have a responsibility toward ensuring social justice and that otherwise they are maintaining the status quo of privilege (Brown, 2004). To foster this move toward social justice in education, there is a need for professional development around areas such as diversity, privilege, self-reflection, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Brown, 2004; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings,

1995). There is also a responsibility of youth development educators to integrate social justice into their professional development and programmatic frameworks. Such action is critical because educators who aim to develop youths without acknowledgment and response to a young person's possible experience with societal inequities are, in fact, perpetuating the injustice (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002).

## Methodology

As noted previously, my intent was to better understand urban 4-H's contribution to social capital and social justice. I accomplished this purpose by interviewing urban educators regarding programs and practices that serve marginalized youths and bolstering those interviews with a content analysis of archival local, state, and national 4-H documents.

I used the interviews with urban educators as my primary method of qualitative data collection. Interviews are a common qualitative research method used to gather in-depth information pertaining to participants' viewpoints and experiences (Creswell, 1994; Turner, 2010). My aim was to determine the extent to which the urban educators' practices aligned with a social capital framework. I conducted at least one 45- to 60-min interview with each urban educator to better understand the educator's perspectives on urban 4-H programs in relation to social capital and social justice. The interview protocol included questions around urban 4-H program quality and programming that serves marginalized youths. I used probing questions as needed to better understand the types of programming that aligned with the social capital framework and were structured to serve youths who have inequitable access to social capital.

Examples of the interview questions are as follows:

1. Social connections (also referred to as social capital) are some of the reported outcomes of a 4-H experience. Some of the conditions related to social capital are trust, engagement, networks, and agency. I would like to discuss with you these factors specifically.
  - a. *Trust*. Do you think your urban 4-H programs foster relationships of trust among youths, adults, and community? Why or why not?
  - b. *Engagement*. Do you think your urban 4-H programs increase the engagement of youths, adults, and the community? Why or why not?
  - c. *Networks*. Do you think your urban 4-H programs increase access to networks among youths, adults, and community? Why or why not?
  - d. *Agency*. Do you think your urban 4-H programs increase youths' sense of agency? Why or why not?
2. What are some of the key elements or qualities of your urban 4-H program?
3. What key elements of positive youth development may relate to social capital concepts?
4. How do you feel about 4-H's efforts to serve marginalized youth?

Turner (2010) reported that interviews are often "coupled with other forms of data collection in order to provide

the researcher with a well-rounded collection of information for analyses" (p. 754). To this end, I conducted a content analysis as a secondary method of data collection. Content analysis involves comparing, contrasting, and categorizing data to more fully understand a phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006). Documents I analyzed were 4-H urban site program descriptions obtained from local and state websites; Extension strategic plans and annual reports; Children, Youth, and Families at Risk program logic models and reports; the National 4-H Strategic Plan; the National Institute of Food and Agriculture Vulnerable Populations Working Group logic model; and other documents relevant to the study.

## Research Sample

The few national Extension networks that connect those in the urban 4-H educator cohort include the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4-HA) Urban Taskforce and the National 4-H Vulnerable Populations Working Group. In 2016, there were 85 members listed on the 2015/2016 NAE4-HA Urban Taskforce electronic mailing list and 10 core members of the Vulnerable Populations Working Group. Three individuals were connected to both groups, leaving a total of 92 unduplicated members of the groups.

From this group of 92, I targeted those who held key leadership roles in urban Extension, had nationally recognized urban programs, represented major cities, and had worked in Extension for at least 5 years. A sample of convenience was derived from this group. Participants were initially contacted via phone or email and/or at national 4-H youth development meetings. A formal invitation and consent form was sent to those who agreed to participate. The final number of interview participants (10) was confirmed once there appeared to be a level of data saturation, a depth of data with recurring themes.

## Data Analysis

To make meaning of the interview data, I used a thematic analysis that consisted of identifying themes and patterns from the interview transcripts (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Willig, 2013). The hybrid deductive and inductive process I used involved (a) determining a priori codes, (b) identifying inductive descriptive codes, (c) assigning axial codes, and (d) linking themes under thematic headings. I used an a priori template of codes to allow the tenets of social capital "to be integral to the process of deductive thematic analysis while allowing for themes to emerge direct from the data using inductive coding" (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83). The final prominent axial codes and thematic headings are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Prominent Axial Codes and Topical/Thematic Headings

<b>Prominent axial codes</b>	<b>Thematic headings</b>
National leadership and intent Statewide/local leadership and intent Branding/marketing	Conduits to serving youths in the margins (structured to serve youths in the margins)
Historical legacies Branding/marketing Sense of inferiority of outreach programs	Barriers to serving youths in the margins (not structured to serve youths in the margins)

Limited resources and capacity  
Lack of organizational cultural  
competence  
and professional development

Trust  
Engagement  
Bonding, bridging, and linking  
networks  
Efficacy

Practices of 4-H urban educators through a social  
capital lens

Quality positive youth  
development through:

- belonging (relationship, culturally relevant pedagogy, inclusivity),
- mastery (engagement and contests, etc.),
- independence (leadership), and
- generosity (community service/service learning)

Essential elements: Promising practices and  
limitations to urban 4-H's contribution to social  
capital

As for the archival content analysis, I used a four-phased approach to collect and analyze related documents. The four phases were (a) deductive a priori coding, (b) preparation, (c) organizing, and (d) reporting (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

## Summary of Findings

The findings gathered from the interviews and content analysis answered the following questions:

1. How is the 4-H program structured to serve youths who have inequitable access to social capital?
2. How do urban 4-H positive youth development educators' narrated practices align with a social capital framework?
3. How can effective urban 4-H programming practices be operationalized nationally?

Table 2 presents findings related to each question. Findings around the first question included national, state, and local 4-H initiatives and barriers related to serving marginalized and diverse youths. With respect to the second question, themes emerged related to the urban educators' perspectives on programs and practices that were aligned with the social capital constructs of trust, engagement, networks, and efficacy. To address the third question, I aligned the effective practices shared by participants with the 4-H foundational essential elements of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.

**Table 2.**

Findings from Interviews with Urban 4-H Educators and Analysis of Archival 4-H Documents

<b>Research question</b>	<b>Findings</b>
<p>How is the 4-H program structured to serve youths who have inequitable access to social capital?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are national, state, and local initiatives regarding equity and inclusion, such as National 4-H Strategic Plan, CYFAR, Vulnerable Populations Working Group, the NAE4-HA urban and diversity task forces, hiring practices, and professional development.</li> </ul> <p><i>Selected raw data:</i></p> <p>"[My county has engaged in] racial equity training, program development, just kind of a whole list to help them engage with those communities. We try to focus on helping them develop cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness . . ."</p> <p>"[To diversify the educator base, they began] targeting organizations and institutions that have a higher proportion of people of [color] . . . so we try to do that . . . reach into our networks . . . and talk about how important it is to bring people of color into our institution."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are barriers to serving youths in margins, such as historical legacies and branding, sense of inferiority of outreach programs, limited resources, and lack of organizational cultural competence/professional development.</li> </ul>
<p>How do urban 4-H positive youth development educators' narrated</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust—Multiple dimensions of trust exist among youths, between youths and educators, between youths and volunteers, and within communities. Some distrust of institutions also exists.</li> <li>• Engagement—Engagement in programs and within the community has been one of the leading outcomes. Yet some educators</li> </ul>



practices align with a social capital framework?

- asserted that 4-H could do better at engaging underserved youths.
- Networks—4-H fosters close relationships within clubs, increased exposure to new opportunities and connections, financial resources, and connections to institutions that can bring about change.
  - Efficacy—Efficacy was fostered through community service, service learning, and leadership opportunities.

*Selected raw data:*

"[Engagement is] primarily what we focus on—[that is], not working with kids in a bubble. We want them to engage in the broader community."

"If done right, one of the key elements of the program is mastering. And so if you are facilitating the experience and you are integrating the essential elements of belonging and mastering independence through community service, if you are doing that, the mastery part is where you get the agency: 'I can do this.' This sense of efficacy, if you will: 'I can accomplish it. I can bring about awareness of issues of homelessness and poverty in my community' . . . the program, if done right, could really affect agency."

How can effective urban 4-H programming practices be operationalized nationally?

- Foster belonging—Address the lack of culturally relevant programs and projects. Provide professional development for educators around inclusion and adapting programs for diverse audiences.
- Opportunities for mastery—Foster inclusive opportunities to demonstrate mastery in contests, fairs, and so on.
- Develop independence—Provide opportunities for youths to serve in club officer positions, to serve as camp counselors, and to serve as teen teachers. Leadership should be included through all 4-H experiences.
- Practice generosity and foster efficacy—Move from lower levels of community service to higher levels of service learning. Organize service that addresses a social issue.
- Implement other promising practices—Hire culturally competent educators, create culturally relevant curricula, provide professional development, and intentionally focus on addressing injustices.

*Selected raw data:*

"After 4-H, youth are leaders in their community, members of the Extension advisory group, come back as volunteers . . ."

"I think opportunities to really, really connect with the community. If it's an authentic project, they're working with all parts of the community. They're working with NGOs. They are working with city governments. They are working with foundations in some cases if they're looking for money and/or resources. They're working with parks and rec department[s]. They're working with community commissions. I think it also facilitates cohesion—group cohesion . . . and this is where you get into the bonding and bridging—it's not only important to know what institutions exist, but to have some sense of meaningful connection to those institutions and those people who represent those institutions."

*Note.* CYFAR = Children, Youth, and Families at Risk. NAE4-HA = National Association of Extension 4-H Agents. NGOs = nongovernmental organizations.

## Discussion and Implications

Although the literature, and findings reported here, indicate that positive youth development programs have the capacity to increase a young person's access to positive role models, essential life skills, and community connections, it is critical that these programs be available and equitable for diverse youth in urban communities (Fields & Nathaniel, 2015b; Perry et al., 2003). Many youth programs aim to serve "all youths"; however, this strategy does not place emphasis on the unique interests and needs of marginalized youth.

As previously mentioned, one of my goals with the research I have described involved working toward the operationalization of practices that foster 4-H social capital and social justice outcomes. After reviewing the related literature and reflecting on the research findings, I identified six philosophical and practical recommendations to support the operationalization of effective practices identified in the summary of findings. Those recommendations are as follows:

1. Support national and statewide initiatives that address diversity and inclusion with a sustainable plan for human capacity and financial support.
2. Reinforce accountability of national 4-H strategic efforts by including methods for measuring levels of success and replicating effective practice.
3. Identify a comprehensive and sustainable plan to support the national 4-H access, equity, and opportunity strategic goal to increase culturally relevant curricula and programs.
4. Showcase the research and effective practices of contribution to social capital that are identified by groups working to meet the needs of urban and marginalized youths.
5. Intentionally increase service learning efforts that address social issues and empower youths to take a critical stance against injustice.

- Increase national, statewide, and local commitments to recruit, develop, and retain diverse and culturally competent educators and volunteers.

## Considerations Related to Foundational 4-H Frameworks

To support the above-mentioned philosophical and practical recommendations, I offer considerations for operationalizing effective practices around social capital and social justice. These considerations are rooted in the findings from the literature, interview data, and content analysis and relate to the following foundational frameworks: the 4-H essential elements model, the 4-H experiential learning model, and the components of positive youth development proposed by Lerner (2005).

First, I share my considerations related to the well-established and vetted essential elements model. I have incorporated into the model language around community capitals, cultural relevance, and injustice to more explicitly communicate the goals and strategic directions from the National 4-H Strategic Plan and the various working groups focused on serving marginalized youth. See Figure 2; my additions to the model are indicated in red.

**Figure 2.**  
Considerations for the 4-H Essential Elements Model

<b>Belonging</b>		<b>Mastery</b>	
1. Positive relationship with a caring adult 		4. Engagement in <b>culturally relevant</b> learning	
2. An inclusive environment  		5. Opportunity for mastery	
3. A safe environment 			
<b>Independence</b>		<b>Generosity</b>	
6. Opportunity to <b>build efficacy</b> and to see oneself as an active participant in the future  		8. Opportunity to value and practice service for others 	
7. Opportunity for self-determination		9. <b>Opportunity to take a critical stance on justice</b> 	

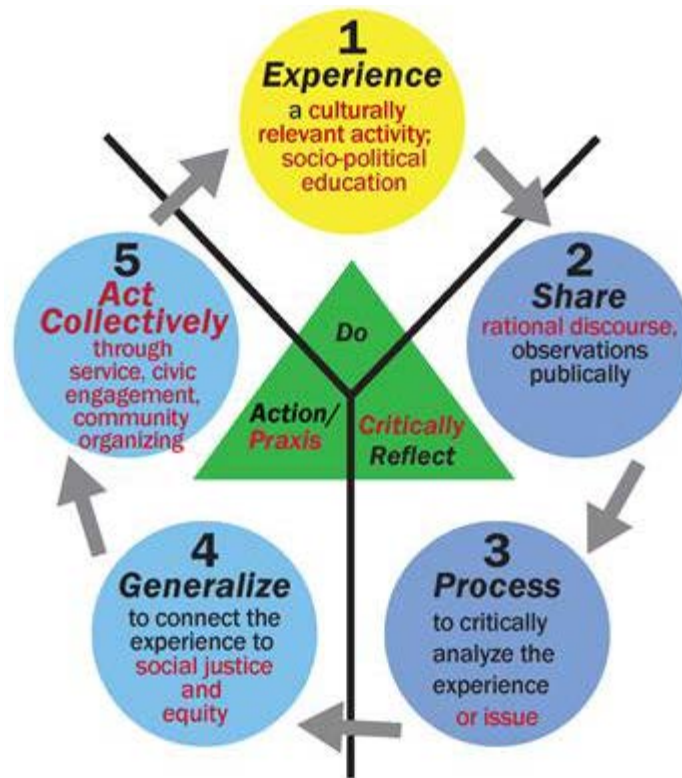
**Legend**

 Social Capital

 Social Justice

Next, I present my considerations for the experiential learning model. These critical experiential learning considerations offer a progressive stance and complement the existing experiential learning model. See Figure 3, where again my recommendations are indicated in red. The concepts that guide these recommendations come from my research findings and from literature offered by Breunig (2005), Dewey (1938), Erbstein (2013), Freire (1970/2012), Ginwright and James (2002), Ladson-Billings (2000), and Rose and Paisley (2012). The revised model is not intended to be a replacement of the 4-H experiential learning model. Rather, it is an adapted model for youth development professionals to consider when engaging youths in social justice youth development.

**Figure 3.**  
Social Justice Youth Development Critical Experiential Learning Model



Lastly, I provide my recommended considerations for the five Cs and sixth C of positive youth development (Lerner, 2005) (see Table 3). My considerations, which again are indicated in red, increase the intentionality of inclusive language, with a focus on diversity, cultural relevance, and social justice.

**Table 3.**

Considerations for the Five Cs and Sixth C of Positive Youth Development

**"Five Cs plus sixth C" component**

**Definition**

Competence	Positive view of one's actions in domain-specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational realms. Social competence pertains to interpersonal skills (e.g., conflict resolution). Academic competence includes school grades, attendance, and test scores. Cognitive competence pertains to cognitive abilities (e.g., decision making). Vocational competence involves work habits and career choice explorations.
Confidence	An internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy; one's global self-regard as opposed to domain-specific beliefs.
Connection	Positive bonds with <b>diverse groups of</b> people and institutions that are reflected in bidirectional exchanges between the individual and peers, family, school, and community in which

	both parties contribute to the relationship.
Character	Respect for <b>diverse cultural norms and values</b> , possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality), and integrity. <i>Note: This should not reinforce a hegemonic understanding of character and acceptable culture and behavior.</i>
Caring and compassion	<b>An understanding of privilege</b> and a sense of sympathy and empathy for others.
(Leads to) Contribution	Contributions to self, family, community, and the institutions of a civil society. <b>Engagement in service and collective action to address social injustice.</b>

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## Conclusion

The literature and interviews revealed interesting and compelling information about the impacts of positive youth development in relation to social capital and social justice. However, they also revealed the dangers that can come from reinforcing systems of exclusion, privilege, and hegemonic practices within education and youth development programs. There were clear linkages between the interviewees' programs and the constructs of social capital. The interviewees spoke of programs that fostered community engagement and opportunities to practice service that addresses social issues. The interviewees also identified some of the barriers they have experienced in serving youths who are most affected by social injustice. It was encouraging to hear of the progressive 4-H practices that have been employed throughout the country yet troubling to know that acts of exclusion have not been isolated to any one 4-H location. All of this information contributed to my recommendations for future research, my conclusions about the implications for organizational practice, and my philosophical stance. It will be important to further explore the outcomes and relevance of the proposed frameworks mentioned herein (Figures 2 and 3, Table 3) to better understand their potential impacts.

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