LGBTQ Access to Generalized Youth Development Programs

Abstract

As the largest youth development organization in the United States, 4-H may be uniquely positioned to meet the needs of rural LGBTQ youth. 4-H has undergone a significant shift towards increasing access, equity, and belonging for youth over the last ten years. However, there is a specific need for research that considers the unique experiences of LGBTQ youth in accessing 4-H in their home communities, and a need for theory to guide research and policy-making decisions in 4-H among other generalized youth development organizations. This qualitative research study proposes a theoretical model of the affordances and constraints rural LGBTQ youth encounter in accessing 4-H. Interviews were conducted with former 4-H members and analysis was informed by grounded theory. Findings suggest that rural LGBTQ youth are influenced by cultures of place, family, community, and rurality. These cultures give rise to certain agricultural traditions and values, youths' personal interests, a gendered and sexualized coding of interests, low tolerance for difference, and a lack of queer community. The resulting tensions between affordances and constraints shape youth involvement patterns, and give rise to unique cultures around queerness in 4-H. The theoretical model developed from this research provides a novel way of considering how rural LGBTQ youth access generalized youth development programs, and the factors that inform decisions to be involved in out-of-school programs such as 4-H.

Keywords: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, LGBTQ, inclusion, diversity, 4-H, Positive Youth Development, rural youth development

Introduction

4-H is the largest youth development organization in the United States (4-H, 2017a) and has served more than 70 million youth aged 5 through 18 over the course of the last century (Hoover et al., 2007; Rosenberg, 2016a). In the last few decades, 4-H has undergone a significant shift in recognizing that young peoples' access to, experience in, and success beyond the program are influenced by their identities, including race, ability, gender, class, and sexuality, among others (Strategic Planning Task Force on Diversity, 1991, p. 9). This is reflected in the current National 4-H strategic plan, which is united under a vision of "4-H Grows":

> In 2025, 4-H will reflect the population demographics, vulnerable populations, diverse needs and social conditions of the country. This vision has the elements of inclusion, caring adults, serving at minimum 1 in 5 youth, and the volunteers and staff reflect the diversity of the population" (4-H, 2018, p. 2).

These goals are supported through an increased focus on access, equity, and belonging as part of 4-H's commitment to social justice (4-H, 2022).

While not explicitly named under the current strategic plan, 4-H has increasingly worked to understand and address the needs of the large number of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth in the program. Such engagement is evidenced by the emergence of LGBTQ-focused conferences (e.g., Ohio 4-H LGBTQ+ Summit, Rainbows Over the Rockies), resource websites (e.g., New York State 4-H, 2019; Rand, 2020), blog posts (e.g., Global 4-H Network, 2017), policy interpretations (4-H, 2017b; UC ANR, 2017; New York State 4-H, 2017), and workgroups (e.g., National 4-H Vulnerable Populations Working Group, National Association of Extension 4-H Youth Development Professionals Diversity and Inclusion Working Group) over the past five years alone. Despite this increasing focus on LGBTQ youth in 4-H, there is very little peer reviewed empirical research published that directly addresses

how LGBTQ youth access 4-H or how to best support them ([Author], 2020). This lack of research is especially critical as recent studies suggest that one in six adult members of Generation Z – those born after 1996 and the population currently engaging in 4-H – self-identify as LGBT (Gallup, 2021). Given these statistics, it stands to reason that of 4-H's 6,000,000 members (4-H, 2020), close to a million 4-H members might identify as LGBTQ.

Prior research in education, youth development, and sexuality studies have consistently shown that youth organizations can play a key role in supporting the educational, emotional, and developmental needs of LGBTQ young people. However, most of this existing research focuses on LGBTQ-specific clubs, not generalized youth programs like 4-H. For instance, LGBTQ-affirming youth organizations, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), play key roles across a broad range of social, academic, health, and wellbeing outcomes (Lee, 2002). Yet access to these LGBTQ-specific programs is shaped by geography. Young people in rural areas are less likely to have access to GSAs or other targeted support programs (Kosciw et al., 2020; Fetner & Kush, 2008), but may have access to generalized youth organizations – those meant for all youth, not just LGBTQ youth – like 4-H, which primarily serve rural communities (NIFA, 2015). Given its potential importance to such youth, scholars have argued for research that examines how generalized youth development organizations (e.g., 4-H, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Scouting, etc.) are and are not serving LGBTQ youth (Fish, 2020; Johns et al., 2019; Mallory et al., 2014). Research on LGBTQ youth in 4-H has implications for the nearly one million potentially LGBTQ youth in 4-H and for the LGBTQ youth who live in areas that are not currently served by LGBTQ-specific youth organizations. In the absence of broader, census-style data on the number of LGBTQ youth currently enrolled in 4-H, there is a need for smaller studies that address how LGBTQ are enrolling in the program, and the affordances and constraints they experience in accessing the program. Theoretical frameworks that are responsive to LGBTQ youth are needed to guide research, policymaking, and evaluation in 4-H and other generalized youth development organizations wishing to better serve the needs of these youth.

Purpose

It is necessary for theory to guide the emerging body of research forming to support LGBTQ youth in schools, in out-of-school programs, and in generalized youth development programs, particularly in the current climate of renewed and increased hostilities towards LGBTQ people and their rights across the U.S. This study seeks to meet these needs by developing a theoretical model of the affordances and constraints rural LGBTQ youth encounter in accessing 4-H, a generalized youth development program that serves a primarily rural audience. In this context, we use the term generalized youth development program to refer to programs that are designed to broadly support all youth, in contrast to GSAs or other programs that are designed to support LGBTQ youth specifically or exclusively. Specifically, the research questions in this study are:

1) What roles do a young person's sexual and gender identities play in accessing 4-H?
2) What affordances do LGBTQ youth encounter in accessing 4-H?
3) What constraints do LGBTQ youth encounter in accessing 4-H?

Methods

This research is part of a larger investigation of LGBTQ people who have been involved in nonformal agricultural education programs as adults and in their youth. The current study examines a specific subset of that data: retrospective interviews with LGBTQ adults reflecting on their time in 4-H as youth.

As LGBTQ people working in the broader agricultural field, and frequently in smaller communities, recruitment to research studies is particularly challenging and risky, as explained by Ellard-Gray et al. (2015):

Hard-to-reach, hidden, and vulnerable populations often face heightened social, psychological, and physical risks when identified as a member of a particular social group, thus making them more hesitant to identify themselves to researchers. Social risks include loss of status, privacy, or reputation if others learn about, for example, one's stigmatized identity […] LGBT individuals often face discrimination in the workplace, harassment, and violence (Herek, 2009), and for those who keep their sexual/gender identities hidden, participation in research related to their identities puts them at increased risk for this negative treatment.[…] Limits on anonymity and confidentiality also exist when populations are contained in small communities where members tend to know one another (p. 3).

Educational researchers are then left to scavenge (Murphy & Lugg, 2016) for participants, data, and methods that can combine analytic strategies across disciplines to approximate an understanding of LGBTQ experiences in educational programs. "Scavenger methodology […] uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies" (Halberstam, 1998, as cited in O'Mally et al., 2015, p. 575). In the current climate, LGBTQ youth in 4-H are difficult to identify, and may be more vulnerable to risk by participating in research, posing significant challenge for researchers doing this work. While the current study manages this challenge by doing retrospective interviews with adults, there are limitations to this approach. Generational differences, differences in program evolution, and differences in broader attitudes towards LGBTQ people have and continue to shift since participants have been enrolled in the program. Even with these limitations, this research offers a critical starting point for theory development.

Participants

To be included in the study, participants must have self-identified as members of the LGBTQ community, 4-H as youth, educators or volunteers with 4-H as adults, and be 18 years or older at the time of the interview. While all participants had both adult and youth experiences, this study only includes retrospective data about their youth experiences in 4-H, not their time as adults. Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience and purposive snowball sampling – common recruitment procedures for hard-to-reach and vulnerable populations (Smith et al., 2015). The study presented here is based on in-depth interviews with seven individuals. They ranged in age between 18 and 45, with a median age of 32. All seven participants were white. Six of the seven were cisgender men, and there was one cisgender woman. Participants were enrolled in 4-H programs in multiple states as young people, spanning across the Northeast, Midwest, South, and West regions of the United States. Their sexual identities included gay (n=5), queer (n=2) and bisexual (n=1), with one participant identifying as both gay and queer (n=1). Participants characterized the communities they grew up in as rural, suburban, or at the intersection of rural and suburban. While they were varying levels of 'out' about their sexuality, most participants were not explicitly out – to themselves or others – until after their time in 4-H. A notable limitation of this analysis is the homogeneity of the sample. While it captures a range of geography and age, it fails to include or adequately capture the experiences of key demographics including LGBTQ people of color, trans and nonbinary people, and cisgender women, among others. Furthermore, the sample included only participants who joined 4-H and does not capture the range of experiences young people might have had that discouraged them from joining.

These demographic data are reported in aggregate and deidentification measures have been taken that extend beyond the use of pseudonyms, to include the altering or removing of specific individuals' names, towns, counties, states, universities, roles, and organizations. This level of deidentification is consistent with best practices for vulnerable participants in small communities (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Participants chose both their own pseudonyms and the pronouns used to refer to them throughout this paper to help ensure they were represented in ways that were in alignment with their gender and ethnic identities.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to ensure topics were covered consistently with all participants, while allowing the researcher to "respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 111). Interviews were conducted through a variety of modalities, and included a combination of in-person, phone, and remote video interviews. The audio-recorded interviews were retrospective, with participants reflecting on their past time in 4-H (ranging from 1-27 years earlier). Because this study is part of a broader investigation, full interviews lasted between one and two and a half hours and covered topics ranging from adult participation in 4-H to childhood experiences. Participants' experiences as young people in the program – the focus of this study – ranged between 16 and 52 minutes of that total time, with an average length of 35 minutes.

Positionality Statement

I, the lead author, served as the sole interviewer for the investigation. I am a white, queer person with ties to agricultural education on the East Coast, Midwest, and West Coast. I grew up on a mixed species hobby farm in a rural Appalachian Trail community in New Jersey. I participated in 4-H horse, dog, and photography projects, and competed in public speaking, horse bowl, hippology, and horse judging contests at the state, county, and national level. I was never out about my sexual identity as a youth member of 4-H. In many ways I am an insider in several of the communities to which the participants in this study belong and create, while an outsider to others. In many cases the participants and I share social, professional, and romantic networks, with intertwined histories, cultures, struggles, joys, biases, languages, and ways of being unique to our shared and divergent social locations.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was informed by Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Following the cleaning and deidentification of transcripts as described above, analysis was conducted using DeDoose, a qualitative data analysis software. In Vivo and Process coding were used to develop a list of initial codes (n = 111) that were then collapsed into 21 focused codes selected for their frequency and salience, and grouped by theme, structure, and intent (Saldaña, 2009). These codes were then turned into axial codes to "strategically reassemble data that were 'split' or 'fractured' during the Initial Coding process" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 159) into broad categories. This analytic strategy, combined with concept-mapping and memoing, resulted in the creation of theoretical codes and the initial construction of a central or core category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Concept maps and a narrative account of the theoretical codes were then taken to member check meetings (n = 2) with participants. The same concept maps and narrative account was also shared in community review meetings (n = 3), hour-long one-on-one meetings with community members who were not study participants but were LGBTQ 4-H alumni. Community members were specifically chosen to include people with a broad range of unique perspectives, including those who were not involved in 4-H as adults, people with gender identities underrepresented in the sample, and people who do programming/advocacy around LGBTQ issues in 4-H or rural communities. These meetings allowed the researcher to explore both tentative interpretations and congruency of the findings with people with different lived experiences. In many cases, participants and community members stayed in dialogue with the researcher to continue to process their interpretations over email in the weeks following their member check or community review meeting. Reflective and analytic memos (n = 20) were created at all junctures of the process – from interviewing through each stage of analysis, member checking, and correspondence – to reflect on the process and provide space for integrated analysis.

Findings

For the participants the study, the cultures of the place influenced the kinds of activities in which they participated as youth, and the sections that follow detail results around this central concept. Four subthemes emerged from the analysis. First, living in places with low tolerance for differences closed off

certain activities or made it such that youth sought out separate spaces where they could adopt different kinds of identities. Second, many youth had unique familial traditions and values that encouraged involvement in both agriculture and civic engagement, and LGBTQ youth sought to gain approval from their families by engaging in activities that aligned with those traditions. Third, young people sought out opportunities to explore their interests yet were keenly aware of how some of these interests were gendered or sexualized. Fourth, navigating these places and cultures frequently left youth without a template, language, or role models of what it meant to be an LGBTQ person in the world, let alone in a rural community. These textured experiences of place, family, agriculture, gender, and sexuality shaped the types of organizations and activities LGBTQ youth sought out – these are presented in a theoretical model of LGBTQ youth organizational access.

Low Tolerance for Difference

An overarching pattern in the interviews were the ways in which participant's experiences of place intersected with sexuality in ways that facilitated and mediated their involvement in different youth activities and community sites. For many participants, their home communities were sites that had low tolerance for difference: differences were punished, disapproved of, or generally not accepted. The risk of being different was often met with punishment, as described by [Participant #1]:

> So just to kind of understand my high school, we had one openly gay kid. And uh, [he] was very demonstrative about that. And so he was a gay goth. God bless his soul. I mean, of all the things you could be when you start mixing rainbows and black, it just kinda gets crazy. And so the school, in not liking different things, tried to ban as much of [him] as possible. So [he] liked to wear dog collars. So we banned dog colors. And he liked to wear chains, so we banned chains. Then one day they decided they wanted to ban the color black. So while the rest of the school dressed up in black to protest, he dressed up in a white sundress. And, uh, yeah, I was like, you know, technically that dress meets school rules, so go for it, [student name redacted]. Then there was a rule about no wearing dresses. […] [He] always pushed the envelope; he was a very brave soul. […] But no, I was the little kid in the corner that just kind of sat there quietly and hoped nobody picked on me.

In response to witnessing negative outcomes for other LGBTQ people, [Participant #1] responded by engaging in strategies to avoid drawing attention to himself. For others, they responded by not getting involved in activities where they witnessed negative outcomes for others or had issues themselves, such as in church or school-based activities. Living in places with low tolerance for differences closed off certain opportunities for involvement for LGBTQ youth who wanted to avoid similar negative outcomes. It is important to note that most participants were not out at this time in their lives – to themselves or others – yet still based their participation and engagement, in part, on their perceptions of safety and tolerance for difference.

In addition to concerns of safety related to their sexuality, many youth were actively seeking out opportunities to explore interests that did not align with their 'school identity,' as [Participant #2] explains:

> Yeah, I would say, um, school, my friends at school, um, did not know that I had cows or sheep or that that was what I was really passionate about in school. I would say I was labeled as, um, a very involved, um, kid that was like played tennis and was in the orchestra. And very few of my friends or acquaintances at school really associated me having an interest in what many people would consider to be more of like a rural, more of a dirtier, sort of downscale activity. [Which is what] I guess what many people would have viewed it as in high school.

In these ways, youth were able to adopt multiple, oftentimes conflicting identities across the spaces that they occupied, when 'being different' was not necessarily celebrated or welcomed in their home communities. Taken together, growing up in places with low tolerance for difference may encourage some LGBTQ youth to join out-of-school programs, when school sites are places where they witness discrimination against LGBTQ peers, and where young people can adopt identities that are different from their 'in-school' identities.

Agricultural Tradition and Values

While experiences of place and risk constrained opportunities for participation (such as in the school example above), many participants received pressure from their families to participate in youth organizations that aligned with familial values and traditions. Their siblings, parents, and grandparents participated in 4-H or other civic organizations, and it was a familial expectation they would carry on the tradition. Even for those whose families were not directly involved in 4-H or lived in rural areas, 4-H represented a way to be involved with an organization that mirrored their family's values, as [Participant #3] described when asked why he got involved in 4-H:

> My parents. It probably is not something I would have done on my own. Both my parents were first generation off the farm children, and I grew up in a suburb of [City] on the side of the river. And so very much I live, um, in what we call southeastern [State], about 10 minutes from [City, State] and it's very much a suburban bedroom type community. And so, growing up in the middle of the suburbs, I, um, had grandparents on both sides, maternal and paternal side that had working farms with livestock and in [State], tobacco, of course. Um, but I didn't have a direct farm experience myself, but those were values that my parents placed a high premium on. And so, they wanted me to engage in some type of program that had a connection to that. And I, at the time I was about nine years old - when you join 4-H in [State] - I was not affiliated strongly with anything else such as sports or um, whatever other opportunities there are, at the time. I really didn't do sports events or church events or anything and this was a way for me to get involved. And it was an area in which my parents thought was an important component of my education.

In many communities, 4-H is synonymous with rural culture (Rosenberg, 2016), and participating in the program was a way for [Participant #3] to connect with the activities and values of his family's rural heritage. Participating in 4-H also was a way for youth to meet the familial expectation that they – as one participant put it – "start supporting ourselves even as children" through their market projects and premiums from fairs. 4-H variably represented a space to develop skills, earn money, learn about agricultural practices, and take part in civic engagement, and many families wanted their children to engage in activities that reflected those values and traditions. [Participant #3]'s story of joining 4-H lays bare the tensions of navigating familial traditions and values that encourage involvement in youth organizations while not having other outlets for involvement. By joining 4-H, LGBTQ youth were able to gain approval from their parents and families while avoiding spaces that were perceived as hostile.

Youth's Personal Interests and the Gendered and Sexual Coding of Interests

Outside of external influence, many participants had personal interests in agriculture that made 4-H an attractive outlet, as [Participant #4] described:

> I joined 4-H when I was 12, because, as I regularly share, I really was attracted to agriculture. And I desperately wanted.... I was the little boy that if I had been a girl, I would have been obsessed with [getting] a pony. But I was obsessed with this pony. I really wanted that. And my parents are not really involved in agriculture, although I grew up very rural. And, um, I kept on bother[ing them]. I mean, I was really incessant. And I remember my mom came home one day and she was like, 'well, we found this club where there's other…' *[aside:] she didn't say this, but really what she was thinking was* 'there's other weird kids just like you, [Participant #4].' And you can go do whatever it is that you're super interested in. That was a year before I joined. And I started pestering 'Hey let me go to that club!' Like, whatever that is, I want to go! And so that's how I joined 4-H.

While it was the animals specifically that hooked [Participant #4], other study participants broadly described their personal interests in biology, life sciences, and animals, as well as communication, politics, and performance. 4-H was a space to merge what participants sometimes referred to as these "dueling interests" of agriculture and interpersonal skills and be in a community of "other weird kids" who shared their passions.

Layered into these personal interests in the content areas were young people's desires to explore activities that were coded as gendered in their communities. For [Participant #4], 4-H was a way to express

a desire that might be perceived as gender transgressive: 'wanting a pony,' which is a 'thing that girls do.' Many of the gay male participants spoke about their interest in things that they coded as feminine, such as caretaking, hair styling, or My Little Pony. For [Participant #5], the study's cisgender female participant, doing masculine coded activities through 4-H was a way to subtly hint about her sexuality and build her confidence, without drawing too much attention:

> Doing rough and tumble things like showing animals, cleaning stalls… there was some piece of gender norm transgression in those activities. Definitely. And it was important to feel a little masculine in those things. I sought that out in doing wrestling and in other parts of my life. Even if I didn't think about it too much at the time, it [4-H] played into that confidence of having another space to fulfill more masculine roles. I didn't want people to notice my sexuality, so getting to express a little bit of masculinity was the only way to allude to or express the sexuality part for me. Even though they are not completely linked, they existed in the same space for me.

4-H allowed many of the participants a space to safely explore their personal interests and transgress gender norms without attracting unwanted attention. This was particularly important, as queer youth expressed a hyper-awareness of how they were being perceived. They were exceptionally aware of "looking gay" or "sounding gay," and how their participation in different activities might hint to others about their sexuality, as [Participant #4] explained:

> Every action has subliminal messages. You know? […] I showed dairy goats as a kid and I was always like – and I have no idea where this, how this, you know, generated – but that was like the *gay* thing. Like, everyone who shows dairy goats that's a guy is gay! I think maybe [it's] the feminine of it? It's like, 'Ohhhhhh*hhhh*, *dairy goats.*'
>
> But I also don't know if I just was a super sensitive to that, 'cause I was processing a whole lot. Like, 'Oh man, is this gunna show off… is [me showing dairy goats] leaking something?' Cause I'm doing this thing. I didn't avoid that because of it, but I knew I managed it. But also, it wasn't like, 'Oh, you're not allowed here.' And it wasn't like, 'Oh, you're going to a part of this space.' It's like, 'okay, that's a thing.' And maybe it wasn't as manly as having a steer, but that wasn't in my future, so.

For some LGBTQ youth, this complex tension between managing perception and exploring their interests played out with a backdrop rooted in the cultures of place and agriculture.

Beyond being able to partake in gendered activities, participation in 4-H allowed young people to alter how they presented themselves without attracting attention. For girls, it was okay to dress in more masculine workwear or leisurewear (like basketball shorts) because those were normal ways of dressing on farm or at 4-H camp. For men, they could invest in their presentation without raising red flags, as captured in this memo from a community review meeting:

> *For guys in 4-H you could be invested in your image. You could think a lot about your hair, and your clothes, and your presentation and it wasn't because you were gay, it was because that's what you had to do in 4-H. Dressing professionally and well-kept, speaking eloquently, being on stage as the president of the club or in the show ring– you can't do that if you're going to be looking all rag tag and slouchy. When you're in those spaces you're going to have good posture and be on top of it. In school that makes you look gay to care about how you're dressed. But in a 4-H speaking contest you look competent, poised, and polished when you care about your dress. Your belt matches your shoes matches your watchband and that's expected of you.*

4-H allowed LGBTQ young people a degree of freedom to transgress place-based gender norms and express their sexuality in subtle ways while being protected by the norms and expectations of the culture of 4-H.

Lacking Role Models and Language

While several factors pushed youth towards 4-H, 4-H was still not a site where they could necessarily be open about their sexuality, in part, because of a lack of language and role models. Many of them did not know other LGBTQ youth or adults, lacked the language to have conversations about the sexuality, or a path for coming out or within the context of their home communities. When asked why he didn't come out as a young person in 4-H, [Particpant #4] said:

> There is no way I would have come out in that community, period. Super rural, very conservative, you know? even though it was [State] there was not a pathway to come out there. […] If I had come out, who knows, I can maybe game that out. But it wasn't the 4-H part. 4-H is of, and with the community.

[Participant #4] draws a link between the ways that the culture of the community – where he assessed that there was no pathway to come out – is reflected in the culture of 4-H. For [Participant #5], the links between her family and 4-H similarly made it difficult to see a way forward in coming out in 4-H:

> But even like now I wouldn't say that I'm fully out either. Like, I haven't like directly told my parents. And so, I don't think a lot of my 4-H community knows because it's so like tied in with my family too. […] Um, cause yeah, I think if I was out to my family, I would probably be closer to coming out within 4-H.

In these places – where cultures of the communities and the families of LGBTQ youth made it difficult to envision a future as a queer or trans adult – cultures of place were reinforced and replicated in the context of youth organizations, like 4-H.

A Theoretical Model of Rural LGBTQ Youth Organizational Access

Youth experiences of the cultures of place, family, community, and rurality collectively shape youth involvement patterns and give rise to unique cultures around queerness within generalized youth organizations. Cultures of place and family give rise to values and traditions that intersect with youth's personal interests to encourage participation in youth organizations. While at the same time, these same cultures create an environment where there is a low tolerance for difference, gendered and sexual coding of interests, and a lack of queer community and LGBTQ-specific outlets that constrain youth opportunities for involvement.

Taken together, young people's experiences of these cultures combine with individual motivations, expectations around involvement, witnessed and direct experiences of bias, and youth assessment of risk to inform how, and if, LGBTQ youth might approach joining youth organizations. These collectively can be understood as a collection of affordances that encourage youth participation, and constraints that limit opportunities for involvement. Notably, no single factor can be solely understood as either a binary affordance or constraint but take on different roles for different people in unique ways when combined with cultural elements. For example, in considering a young gay boy's journey to decide to enroll in 4-H, his family may value civic engagement (affordance) and he may be interested in fashion (affordance), which is gendered as feminine (constraint), and those interests may be punished in an environment where there is low tolerance for difference (constraint), yet his assessment of risk and individual motivation may encourage him to enroll in 4-H public speaking contests to more safely explore these ideas without crossing 'too far' to participate in sewing and fashion projects. What emerges are dynamic tensions between sexuality and organizational access, participation, and identity management that shape youth involvement patterns and give rise to unique cultures around queerness within youth organizations, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

LGBTQ youth negotiate cultures of place, family, community, and rurality in relationship to their sexuality to develop contextually based adaptive strategies.
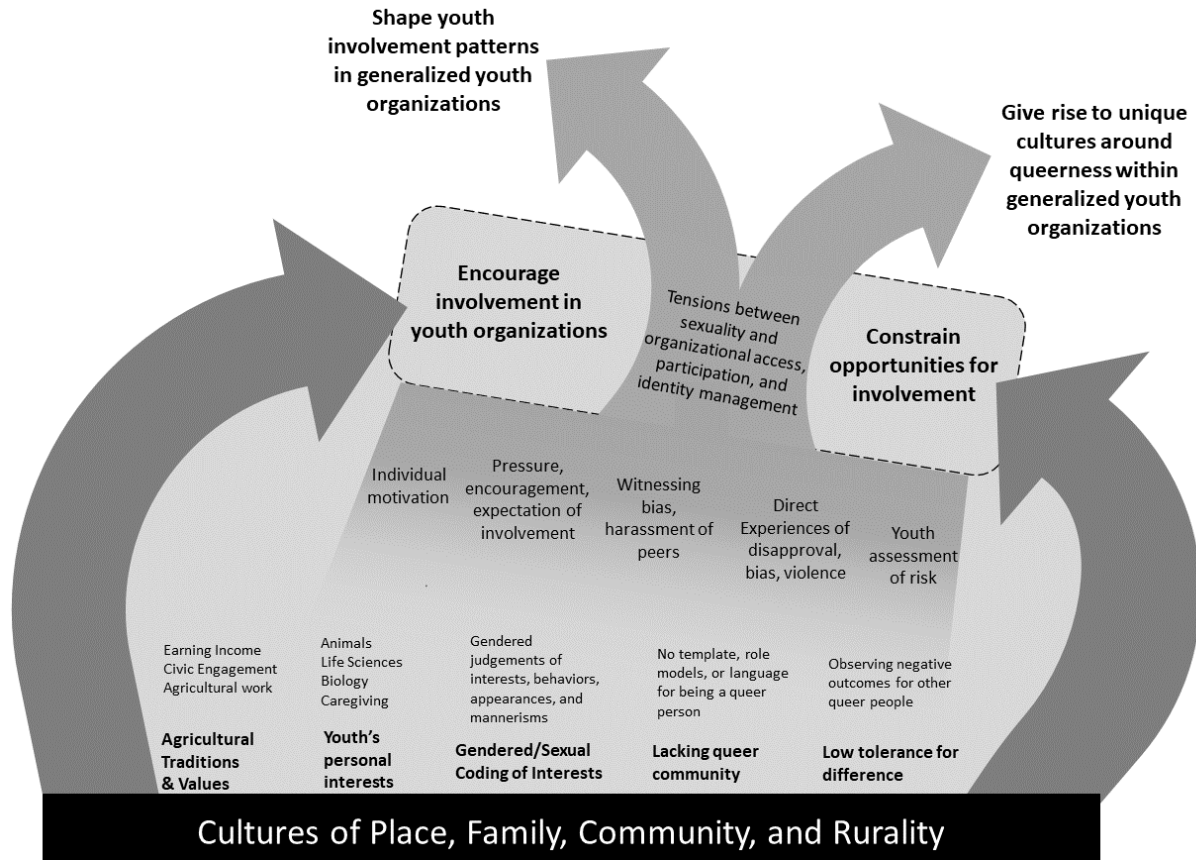
Discussion

Sexual and gender identities play complex roles in how LGBTQ youth access generalized youth development programs. This theoretical model of rural youth organizational access can help explain, in part, young peoples' decision making and opportunity landscape. The following section explores that decision to participate across four themes: (1) schools can be unsafe, (2) there is a lack of LGBTQ-specific support ,(3) 4-H's rural values and diverse opportunities, and (4) the opportunity to explore gender-transgressive interests. These collectively shape youth involvement and cultures around outness in 4-H.

Schools can be Unsafe, and May Encourage Youth to Pursue Out-of-School Organizations

LGBTQ youth may join out of school generalized youth development programs because of the identity-specific harassment and bias they experience or witness in schools, and these effects were amplified for participants who did live in rural areas, or came from rural families. [Participant #1]'s story of [the student]'s struggle in school points to the issues LGBTQ youth face in rural communities, and how that bias impacts their participation in schools and youth groups. LGBTQ youth living in rural communities are "both more vulnerable to discrimination and less able to respond to its harmful effects" (Movement Advancement Project, 2019, p. 1). Research has shown that school climates are unsafe for LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming students broadly (Kosciw et al., 2018), where harassment is widespread and youth experiences negative outcomes related to health, violence, suicide, and academic performance ([State] Safe Schools Coalition & 4-H Center for Youth Development, 2004). The negative effects of school climate are

intensified for youth in small towns, who face more hostile climates, higher rates of biased language, victimization, and discriminatory school policies and practices on the basis of their sexual identity (Kosciw et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2012). Students who were harassed based on their sexual identity were less connected to the school ([State] Safe Schools Coalition & 4-H Center for Youth Development, 2004). A majority of LGBTQ students reported avoiding school functions and extracurricular activities because of harassment related to their sexual identity (Kosciw et al., 2018). The impacts of a hostile school climate are amplified for LGBTQ youth in rural areas, and may lead LGBTQ youth to seek social support in out-of-school programs, like 4-H.

Rural LGBTQ Youth Lack Role Models and Opportunities for LGBTQ-specific Support
        The pattern of turning towards 4-H in the presence of a hostile school climate may be tied to the lack of targeted support for rural LGBTQ youth, and 4-H's position in rural communities. LGBT youth in rural areas are the least likely to have access to Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), targeted support programs, and LGBTQ-related resources or networks of support in their schools (Kosciw et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2018; Fetner & Kush, 2008). Some youth who lacked access to LGBTQ-specific resources navigated unsupportive communities by using other groups, agencies, or programs to buffer against negative experiences (Higa et al, 2014). For many youth, 4-H is an accessible community group: 4-H operates in every county and parish in the United States (4-H, 2020) and the program primarily serves rural youth. 44% of enrolled 4-H members live in rural communities, 30% in urban, and 25% in suburban areas (NIFA, 2015). Given the ubiquity of 4-H in rural life and culture (Hoover et al., 2007; Rosenberg, 2016a) it is not surprising that LGBTQ youth, like [Participant #1] and other participants in the study, would turn to 4-H for support.

4-H Bridges Rural Values with Diverse Opportunities for Involvement
        4-H is also uniquely positioned to meet young people's desires to explore their personal interests and connect to the agricultural traditions and values held by their family, community, and rural cultural. 4-H's historical origins makes it uniquely positioned supported LGBTQ youth's "dueling interests" in leadership and agriculture. 4-H was established in 1902 as corn clubs for rural youth to learn mechanized farming techniques and teach them to their families. Youth were considered more receptive learners than adults, and 4-H positioned youth as "mediaries between the university researcher/educator and the farmer in the community" (Van Horn et al., 1998, p. 1). The program was formed under the administrative oversight of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and operated through the Cooperative Extension program at Land Grant Universities. 4-H was designed to meet these agency's priorities: to spread technological innovations, mechanize agriculture, and remedy the trend of rural youth leaving farming to pursue opportunities in urban centers (Rosenberg, 2016a). This historical legacy explains, in part, 4-H's broader focus on leadership development and personal development in addition to scientific and agricultural projects. This dual focus was important for the LGBTQ youth in the study who were interested in exploring both sides simultaneously.

4-H Offers Opportunities to Explore Gender-Transgressive Interests
        LGBTQ youth in the study were keenly aware of how their interests, hobbies, and activities were coded in gendered and sexualized assumptions because of the cultures of the place they lived, their family, their community, or rural culture more broadly. This not only shaped what kinds of activities in which they participated (football and church versus theater and sewing), but also shaped project selection within 4-H (dairy goats vs steers). While gender is encoded in all facets of life – urban and rural (Campbell et al., 2006) – traditional notions of white heterosexual masculinity are reified and reinforced through one's relationships with meat (Rothgerber, 2013; Sobel, 2005), farm machinery and tractors (Brandth, 1995; Saugeres, 2002), livestock breeding (Rosenberg, 2020; Rosenberg 2016a), as well as agricultural landscapes (Saugeres, 2002). This is mirrored in the study's findings around white, gay, men's relationship with activity choice and project choice within 4-H, and the attendant hyper-vigilance surrounding decisions to pursue less 'masculine' animal projects, such as horses or dairy goats. Even in this landscape, the project-based model

of 4-H offers young LGBTQ youth the opportunity to pursue these gender-transgressive interests alongside more traditional 'masculine' and 'feminine' projects that aligned with their cultures' expectations. For example, girls could take up steer projects that were coded as 'masculine' alongside sewing projects that were coded as 'feminine,' all under the same organizational umbrella, fulfilling expectations for involvement while exploring gender-transgressive interests.

Youth Involvement and Cultures around Outness

For the participants in this study, their involvement in 4-H was a multi-dimensional decision-making process that required nuanced negotiations between their emerging sexuality and their cultures of place, family, community, and rurality. Enrollment in 4-H may have been a safer way to explore their interests and satisfy cultural expectations around civic participation than participation in other activities. Youth could not conceive of being out in these communities or in the organization at large, and their sexual identities may be backgrounded while participating in these programs.

Studies of LGBTQ issues in 4-H suggest the organization may not be currently equipped to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth. LGBTQ youth experience educational spaces and youth organizations differently than their straight and cisgender peers (Kosciw et al., 2020), and studies of 4-H educators and leaders have suggested adults in 4-H were unprepared to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth. Volunteers and staff lacked basic knowledge about LGBTQ communities, exhibited varying degrees of homophobia, and did not know how to best support LGBTQ youth (Poliseno, 2019; Swires, 2018; Soder, 2009). At the same time, 4-H lacks policies and practical guidelines that address how LGBTQ youth are accommodated in programming (Poliseno, 2019). However, the impacts of this organizational environment – unprepared educators and few formal policies – require further investigation. LGBTQ youth may have unique experiences that are currently understudied and undertheorized in a 4-H context ([Author], 2020). The need for theory that is responsive to the unique experiences of LGBTQ youth is heightened as Extension evaluators have shifted towards assessing how theory links program plans to program outcomes (Arnold & Cater, 2016).

Limitations

As previously identified, the results of this study are limited in multiple ways. The homogeneity of the sample – it fails to include or adequately capture the experiences of key demographics, including LGBTQ people of color, trans and nonbinary people, and cisgender women, among others. This is especially critical as prior studies have shown how agricultural education operates as a racialized and gendered space (e.g., Martin & Hartmann, 2020; Poliseno, 2019; Rosenberg, 2016a). Furthermore, interviewees were all youth who did successfully access and participate in 4-H, and does not explore reasons that LGBTQ youth might elect not to enroll in 4-H.

The interviews were retrospective, which fails to capture the unique ways that the culture and experiences within the program may have shifted for youth who are currently enrolled. Although useful for understanding adults' perspectives of their experiences in nonformal agricultural education and how it intersects with their identities, there is a risk that participants may have blocked or minimized their memories of traumatic events as LGBTQ people in the program as a coping strategy (Rosario et al., 2001) or may not have divulged them to an interviewer. Future research should focus on youth currently enrolled in such programs to gain a better understanding of current experiences. Ultimately, this paper does not seek to create a model of a universal queer experience – as there is no such thing – but to add to an emerging understanding of how youth navigate complex environments to access support.

Conclusion and Implications

As 4-H increasingly pays attention to access, equity, and belonging, there is a need for theory to guide research and policy. This study proposes a theoretical model of how LGBTQ youth encounter unique

environments of affordances and constraint that shape their organizational access and involvement. This theoretical model can help to frame ongoing research into LGBTQ youth experiences of 4-H and other out of school positive youth development programs. Future research into youth access and experience within these programs is needed to understand how LGBTQ youth experience the services of generalized youth development programs, like 4-H, that they are more likely to have access to in communities that may lack LGBTQ-specific programs and resources.

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