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When You Can't Say It Aloud: Queer Youth Resilience in Agricultural Education

By

KAITLYN A. MURRAY
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

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in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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2023

ABSTRACT

For more than 30 years, the field of agricultural education has grappled with complex questions of how to recruit, support, retain, and teach diverse youth. Yet the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community is rarely included in published agricultural education research. In Chapter 2, this philosophical paper addresses the immediate need for understanding more about LGBTQ youth in agricultural education, while identifying opportunities and specific strategies to shift the culture of agricultural education research towards inclusion. Queer theory is leveraged to reveal a nascent body of literature related to sexuality in 4-H and school-based agricultural education. LGBTQ youth in agricultural education face significant challenges: educators ill prepared to meet their needs, a lack of policies to inform decision making, active homophobia from teachers and peers, among others. Agricultural education researchers face methodological and disciplinary barriers to conducting LGBTQ research. Authors employ unique tactics to conduct and disseminate their work. Understanding these strategies and analyzing the conditions that necessitate their use contributes to the disciplinary knowledge of how to conduct inclusive research – not just for LGBTQ youth – but for the profession writ large.

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 in Chapter 3 proposes a conceptual 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 proposed conceptual 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.

In Chapter 4, the conceptual model proposed in Chapter 3 is extended to look at the context-adaptive strategies that youth engage in to survive and thrive in the in 4-H, and how these strategies are implicitly and explicitly supported by 4-H. LGBTQ youth navigated these complex environments by engaging in strategies that allowed them to survive and put them on pathways towards thriving in the context of 4-H. Youth sublimated their sexuality in 4-H through busyness, not talking about it, and seeking out desexualized environments. They accepted tolerance in 4-H because they were broadly supported outside their sexuality, received subtle messages of non-support, and lacked the expectation that they would be acknowledged as LGBTQ people in 4-H. These context-adaptive strategies are supported by the culture, policies, and structure of 4-H and youths' home communities. The results of this study can be applied to make 4-H a more affirming place for LGBTQ youth and can be leveraged to enact broader systemic changes that address the root issues these youth face. Taken together, this dissertation

leverages queer theory and grounded theory to advance an emergent understanding of LGBTQ resilience in agricultural education.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

For more than 30 years, the field of agricultural education has been grappling with complex questions of how to recruit, support, retain, and bring diverse youth into a global agricultural workforce. These questions are frequently cited as "one of the biggest challenges facing agriculture and natural resource professionals and educators" today (Outley, 2008, p. 139). Issues around student recruitment, placement into agricultural careers, and retention in the field are even more urgent given the labor market in agriculture. Employment opportunities in agriculture far exceed the number of qualified graduates (Goecker et al., 2015). Agricultural education specifically is challenged by persistent employee shortages (Eck & Edwards, 2019) and high turnover rates (Moser & McKim, 2020). Traditional models of youth agricultural education – inclusive of school-based agricultural education, FFA, and 4-H – recognize the imperative of delivering high quality education that meets the needs of diverse youth. Yet the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community has been consistently omitted from research, policy, programming, and strategic planning in agricultural education (Murray et al., 2020) despite research that demonstrates how an individual's sexual identity and gender identity impact their experiences of the field (e.g., Soder, 2009; Swires, 2018). While the number of LGBTQ people in agricultural education – as employees or students – is unknown, estimates that 4.5% of the population identify as LGBTQ (Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, 2019) suggest that millions of LGBTQ people are likely affiliated with the field. Research into LGBTQ peoples' experiences across the pipeline from agricultural education to agricultural careers may help address these ongoing shortages and may have implications for millions of LGBTQ students and employees in the field.

LGBTQ youth face significant and unique challenges, particularly in rural areas. 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 (California 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 (California 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).

Generalized youth development programs, like 4-H, may be uniquely positioned to provide services to LGBTQ youth, however, there is a lack of research into LGBTQ youth experiences in generalized youth development programs and agricultural education. 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 existing research focuses on LGBTQ student support in the context of 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. This dissertation seeks to address the need for research into LGBTQ people in agricultural education and generalized youth development programs.

Taken together, these studies of LGBTQ people in 4-H collectively engage in questions of queer resilience. "Queer resilience represents the skills and abilities that are learned and developed because of adversarial experiences or stressors due to prejudice, discrimination, and violence rooted in homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. These skills and abilities are historically and contextually dependent, as well as intimately connected to related forms of prejudice, discrimination, and violence based on other forms of difference." (Greteman, 2021, p. 1). Chapter 2, Queering Agricultural Education Research: Challenges and Strategies for Advancing Inclusion, does so leveraging queer theory to uncover a nascent body of literature outside the canon of the field. Chapter 3, An Emerging Conceptual Model of LGBTQ Youth Organizational Access in 4-H, explores how LGBTQ youth navigate their cultures of community, rurality, and place give rise to affordances and constraints related to organizational

access that shape youth involvement in generalized youth development programs and give rise to unique cultures around queerness. Chapter 3, 4-H As a Site of LGBTQ Surviving and Thriving, investigates the contextually-based adaptive strategies LGBTQ youth engage in in 4-H, how these strategies are supported by 4-H, and how they enable youth to survive and thrive. These threads of thrival and survival are intimately linked: "to engage queer thrival is to ask that we investigate, uncover, and invent ways of thriving upon and amid our surviving. However, it does not replace the continued need to address and advocate for survival. Rather, queer thrival looks to help guide queers into a twenty-first century in ways that do justice to our existence utilizing our survival to cultivate our queer thrival." (Greteman, 2016, p. 310). All three studies present queer ways of being that open up possibilities for thriving alongside methods for surviving. This, collectively, can be understood as queer resilience.

It is important to note, however, that the goal of this work is not meant to advocate towards a more resilient person, but rather to highlight the oppressive structures that create the *need* for LGBTQ people to be so resilient, with the hope towards transforming these structures:

> The concept of resilience may leave structures of oppression intact by not interrogating the oppressive structures and through only focusing on the youth getting by (or succeeding under capitalism) despite hardships […] The work, though, should be about creating a world that does not require resilience because we have dismantled the structures and obstacles blocking and harming marginalized youth. It is the interlocking systems of oppression that force people to be resilient, and the very Western, US-driven mentalities of rugged individualism historically, and more recently neoliberalism, also undergird this pressure to be individually resilient despite the multiple inequalities that

require marginalized people to try to succeed despite obstacles (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021, p. 11)

In following this critical view of resilience, the studies of this dissertation seek to identify survival strategies, while naming and identifying the oppressive structures that create the need for resilience, with an eye towards system transformation. “By plugging gaps in the short term and ensuring survival in the long term, resilience ensures the future whereby transformation may occur. As a precursor to potential transformation, resilience becomes an important first link of the sequence, but also as a social and spatial ‘fix’ to sustain certain social orders and absorb crises.” (DeVerteuil & Golubchikov, 2016, p. 149) At the same time, “resilience does not occur naturally within a ‘resilient person’; it occurs within the interaction between youths’ intentional efforts and the resources that support them.” (Asakura, 2017, p. 533). The chapters of this dissertation explore these resources that support them, and people’s intentional efforts to create lives despite challenging conditions. Resilience is also not simply about ‘bouncing back’ to a normative state, but the charting of new trajectories (DeVerteuil & Golubchikov, 2016) towards uniquely queer futures (Greteman, 2018). This dissertation explores the unique ways queer people have survived and thrived in agricultural education.

Chapter 2. Queering Agricultural Education Research: Challenges and Strategies for Advancing Inclusion

Introduction

For more than 30 years, the field of agricultural education has been grappling with complex questions of how to recruit, support, retain, and teach diverse youth. These questions are frequently cited as "one of the biggest challenges facing agriculture and natural resource professionals and educators" today (Outley, 2008, p. 139). Traditional models of youth agricultural education – inclusive of school-based agricultural education, FFA, and 4-H – recognize the imperative of delivering high quality education for *all* students. Decades of institutional messaging reflect the urgency of this priority. For instance, Cooperative Extension extends a vision of eliminating discrimination across the system and ensuring that "recognition, power, privilege, and opportunity are extended to all people because they are valued for all aspects of their age, class, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race, sexual orientation, spiritual practice, and other dimensions of human diversity" (Strategic Planning Task Force on Diversity, 1991, p. 9). This vision is again articulated in the National 4-H strategic plan (4-H, 2017), goals of agricultural education societies (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2019; National Association of Agricultural Educators, 2013), and in FFA bylaws (FFA, 2018). The American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) has issued continued charges to make the field of agricultural education research more inclusive, underscoring how these priorities are mirrored in the academy. The first goal of the 2017-2020 AAAE strategic plan is to "build a more inclusive culture within the society" such that "AAAE membership and activities will reflect the broader discipline and provide a coordinated response to social science issues affecting agriculture and related sciences" (AAAE, 2017, p.1). AAAE's core value of inclusivity

(AAAE, 2017) is reflected in AAAE's (2016) National Research Agenda, which guides the *Journal of Agricultural Education.* According to the National Research Agenda (AAAE, 2016), one of the highest priorities for the field of agricultural education is to determine strategies for recruiting diverse populations into agricultural and natural resources careers. As a field, agricultural education, AAAE, and the *Journal of Agricultural Education* have called upon researchers to conduct and publish studies that address social issues and inclusion.

Despite this ongoing commitment to promoting inclusion, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) community is frequently overlooked in agricultural education and remains understudied in agricultural education research. For example, sexuality is not included in the analysis in key papers that investigate diversifying the agricultural workforce (e.g., Hoover, 2016); agriscience classrooms (e.g., Denson, 2017; Alston et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2009); nonformal agricultural education programs, such as FFA or 4-H (e.g., Martin & Kitchel, 2015; LaVergne, 2015; Lawrence et al., 2013); and postsecondary agricultural education (e.g., Esters, 2007). LGBTQ-specific analyses are omitted from research related to cultural proficiency (e.g., Turley, 2017); teacher attitudes towards diversity (e.g., LaVergne et al., 2011; Warren & Alston, 2007); diversity in secondary agricultural education (e.g., Luft, 1996); and culturally competent pre-service teacher preparation (e.g., Talbert & Edwin, 2008; Wakefield et al., 2006). Even systematic reviews of diversity-related literature in agricultural education fail to incorporate sexual orientation as a social identity (e.g., Tubbs, 2015). The lack of published research related to sexual orientation in the field's primary academic journals – *Journal of Agricultural Education, Journal of Extension,* and *Journal of Youth Development* – was first documented by Soder (2009) and has continued uninterrupted over the last ten years (Poliseno, 2019).

The lack of published, peer-reviewed, research about LGBTQ youth is particularly concerning given increased practitioner demand for resources to understand and support LGBTQ youth in agricultural education. Agricultural educators are increasingly organizing conferences (e.g., Ohio 4-H LGBTQ+ Summit, Rainbows Over the Rockies), magazine articles (e.g., Ermis, 2018), white papers (e.g., Hamilton-Honey, 2017), poster presentations (e.g., Ryan et al., 2018), professional development sessions (e.g., Cultivating Change Foundation), resource websites (e.g., New York State 4-H, 2019) and blog posts (e.g., Boehm, 2019; Global 4-H Network, 2017) in an attempt to meet the urgent need for research and best practices for supporting LGBTQ youth in agricultural education. This need is echoed across disciplines, such as in public health, where research priorities call for studies of LGBTQ youth support in positive youth development contexts, specifically 4-H (Johns et al., 2019).

The number of agricultural education students impacted by the need for research on LGBTQ issues is not insignificant. There are approximately 1,000,000 youth enrolled in secondary agricultural education (NAAE, n.d.) and nearly 6,000,000 youth in 4-H (4-H, 2020). With current estimates that 4.5% of the population actively identify as LGBT (Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, 2019) it stands to reason that somewhere in the realm of 315,000 agricultural education students and 4-Hers are LGBTQ. Research into LGBTQ youth has the potential to impact hundreds of thousands of youth in agricultural education.

Agricultural education has already responded to similar charges to take up new research topics around inclusion, such as the 40-year movement to produce more scholarship on race and ethnicity in agricultural education in response to decades of segregation. Early research on race and agricultural education first emerged in the 1980s (e.g. Findlay & Rawls, 1984) and began being published in the *Journal of Extension* more regularly in the 1990s (e.g. Cano & Bankston,

1993; Escott et al., 1996; McCray, 1994). It was not until the 2000s, a full decade later, when similar research on race and ethnicity began regularly appearing in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* (e.g., Croom & Alston, 2009; Esters & Bowen, 2004; Roberts et al., 2009) and the *Journal of Youth Development* (e.g. Forman et al., 2009; Harper et al., 2007). These studies have continually pointed to ways that marginalized students experience agricultural education differently than their peers, and the critical importance of advancing equity and inclusion. These modern experiences have their root in historical precedent: Black students were only integrated in 1965, when the New Farmers of America was absorbed into FFA as a result of the Civil Rights Act (Wakefield & Talnert, 2003) and women were only allowed membership in FFA in 1969. A culture of discrimination in agricultural education existed for decades. The profession has since taken a more active role in working to end discrimination by conducting research on inclusion. It is little surprise then that emergence of scholarship around race and ethnicity in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with increased focus on research methodology and research agenda development (Kitchel & Ball, 2014). Similarly, such advances present the opportunity to leverage novel theories, such as queer theory, to extend research into sexual orientation in agricultural education.

Purpose

Despite the clear practitioner demand, documented transdisciplinary interest, and established precedent, there has been a lack of published, peer reviewed research on sexual orientation in youth agricultural education. In addressing this problem, the purpose of this paper is to lay the philosophical underpinnings for a more inclusive approach to agricultural education research. Doing so addresses the immediate need for greater understanding about LGBTQ youth

in agricultural education, while identifying opportunities and specific strategies to shift the culture of agricultural education research in a way that promotes inclusion.

Theoretical Framework

Through this philosophical paper, we leverage queer theory to identify and analyze a nascent canon of literature on sexuality in agricultural education. Philosophical studies in agricultural education seek “to develop canons for what is ‘real, true, and of value’ for a profession” (Kitchel & Ball, 2014, p. 188). Therefore, in keeping with goals of other philosophical papers, queer theory is used for the “analysis and synthesis of concepts and theories” (Baker et al., 2012, p. 2). Rather than arguing for an irrefutable truth, this philosophical paper provides further insight and discussion into an often ‘hidden’ phenomenon.

To help frame this conversation, we provide below a list of terms that may be less familiar – or used in less familiar ways – to the reader, then an overview of queer theory, and finally a discussion of how queer theory can be applied to organize and think differently about a field’s body of literature.

Table 1. Terms and Definitions Employed in this Paper

Term	Definition
Binary	A way of classifying information as consisting of two distinct, symmetrical, opposing items.
Canon	A collection of works that are generally recognized as authoritative or important in a field.
Citational practices	Methods of choosing specific authors or pieces of work to attribute credit to for an idea or collection of knowledge.
Deficit framework	A way of viewing a marginalized or minoritized group as less than, lacking, or deficient when compared to their majority peers (Ladson-Billings, 2006).
Queer	A broad group of culturally marginalized sexual and gender identities; or an elastic theoretical model used to interrogate what is deemed ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ (Jagose, 1996).
Rhetorical strategies	Persuasive language used by authors to support claims and construct arguments (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

Scavenging methodologies	The use of indirect or nontraditional strategies to produce information from different data sources to study a population that has been purposefully or accidentally excluded (Halberstam, 1998; Murphy & Lugg, 2016).

Queer theory originated in the gay and lesbian movement and draws on decades of work in poststructural theory, sexuality studies, and women's studies. The term 'queer' can be differentially employed to refer to a broad group of culturally marginalized sexual and gender identities or as an elastic theoretical model used to interrogate what is deemed 'normative' and 'non-normative' (Jagose, 1996). As a theoretical tool, queer theory can be applied to deconstruct normative systems by teasing out the internalized, openly acknowledged, hidden, and contested tensions and contradictions (Mohanty, 1988). To 'queer' something, then, is to apply this theoretical model that makes strange what is taken for granted and rendered as normal.
The lack of peer reviewed, published research in the field's primary academic journals might be traditionally thought of as a 'gap' in the literature, but that gap can be queered. These 'gaps' in the literature are less reflective of a lack of intellectual ability, capacity, urgency, or interest of academics to publish on these issues. Instead, they reflect the state of a system that often excludes these ideas from the academy (Bhattacharya, 2015; Love, 2019).

Queer theory can be used to analyze a discipline's body of literature in a way that makes LGBTQ texts and themes visible. First, through a minoritizing view, queer theory can assemble "alternative canons of lesbian and gay male writing *as* minority canons, as a literature of oppression and resistance and survival and heroic making" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 51). Second, through a universalizing view, by "making salient the homosocial, homosexual, and homophobic strains and torsions in the already existing master-canon" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 51). These methods, however, are not binary opposites. There is generative space *between* each of these threads: it is "not by the suppression of one model and the consequent withering away of

another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models" (1990, p. 47). There, we use queer theory to identify literature by and about LGBTQ people in agricultural education to create a new body of literature; to identify queer themes in the existing body of agricultural education literature; and, to examine the spaces between.

Analysis with queer theory can be taken one step further by questioning what normally *counts* as 'the literature,' and what is made possible when researchers assemble a more complex, messy, and queer version of 'the literature.' In other words, queer theory can provide an analytic tool to deconstruct normative ideas of what counts as knowledge (Sedgwick, 1990). Academic perspectives maintain clear divisions and boundaries in types of knowledge, between what is official knowledge – traditionally that which is peer-reviewed and published– and what might variably be referred to as practitioner, folk, lay, or common knowledge. This organization categorizes knowledge as belonging to one of two distinct symmetrical, opposite, binary pairs. These pairs are inherently unstable and incoherent because each paired term depends on its opposite for its meaning (Butler, 19990; Sedgwick, 1990). This philosophical approach oppresses knowledge on all sides – keeping academia from exploring cutting edge issues by failing to acknowledge community-situated truths, while holding back practitioners by delegitimizing other forms of knowledge. Traditional views of the literature hold that published, peer reviewed empirical studies are the most trustworthy forms of academic knowledge. Yet queer theory provides a framework for understanding how research outside of published, peer-reviewed journals, such as the *Journal of Agricultural Education*, must be considered as part of the literature, as they hold critical knowledge not otherwise represented.

Queering what counts as the literature is particularly important when openly LGBTQ topics and people are excluded from the literature. Sedgwick theorized that "men who write

openly as gay men have also often been excluded from the consensus of the traditional canon" (1990, p. 58). While Sedgwick (1990) refers solely to authors, others have pointed to the ways LGBTQ topics – or research openly about LGBTQ people and issues – are similarly excluded from the canon (e.g. LaSala et al., 2008). Sedgwick's (1990) assertion has at least two interpretations: that LGBTQ topics and people are not likely to be included in 'the literature', or, if they are, they will be in some way closeted or hidden. Maintaining binaries of 'official' and 'unofficial' knowledge in academia (and the positioning peer reviewed, published research over other knowledge sources) keeps LGBTQ topics hidden within 'the literature' and keeps open LGBTQ research outside 'the literature'. Therefore, these LGBTQ literatures exist at the margins not because they are less important, but because there are broader systems that exclude openly LGBTQ people and research. We use queer theory in this paper both to examine the research that exists at the margins, while arguing for the need to confer status on the margins and bring these LGBTQ topics to the center through peer review and publication.

Results & Discussion

First in this section we provide an overview of the state of sexuality research in agricultural education broadly, then review specific literature related to sexuality organized by context: first 4-H, then school-based agricultural education and FFA. These papers together serve as a foundation for a broader discussion about queering agricultural education: or what can be learned from queering what counts as knowledge and assembling these works as a body of literature. In the case of this paper, analysis of this body of literature reveal both challenges to inclusion and the strategies authors use to advance inclusion within the context of the discipline.

Review of Sexuality in Agricultural Education

Scholarship around sexuality has existed at the margins and in the canon of agricultural education. There have been no empirical studies with a primary focus on sexuality published in any of the field's major journals (Table 2). However, within these journals there was one empirical study that included a few questions about sexual orientation (Moore et al., 2001) and four non-empirical works, including two literature reviews (Soule, 2007; Gonzalez et al., 2020) and two opinion articles (McKee & Bruce 2019; Meyers, 2008) that directly and indirectly address sexuality. The majority of research that directly addresses sexual orientation in the purpose and central research questions were unpublished master's theses. While this paper specifically focuses on youth agricultural education, it is worth noting the existence of two recent empirical papers that explore questions of sexuality in college-level agricultural education (Elliott-Engle et al., 2019; Martin & Hartmann, 2020).

Table 2. LGBTQ agricultural education texts

Author, Year	Research Type	Sexuality focus	Focal Organization	Manuscript Type	Publication Status
Meyers 2008	Not research	Primary	Extension	Commentary	*Journal of Extension*
Soder 2009	Quantitative (survey)	Primary	4-H	Thesis	Unpublished
Moore et al. 2001	Quantitative (survey)	Secondary	School-based agricultural education	Journal Article	*NACTA Journal*
Swinehart 2013	Quantitative (survey)	Secondary	FFA / School-based agricultural education	Thesis	Unpublished
Rosenberg 2016a	Historical	Primary	4-H	Book	University of Pennsylvania Press.
Soule 2017	Literature review	Primary	Extension / 4-H	Literature Review	*Journal of Human*

					Sciences and Extension
Swires 2018	Mixed methods (survey, interviews)	Primary	4-H	Master's Project	Unpublished
Austin 2018	Quantitative (survey)	Primary	School-based agricultural education	Thesis	Unpublished
Poliseno 2019	Qualitative (interviews)	Primary	4-H	Master's Project	Unpublished
McKee & Bruce 2019	Not research	Secondary	Extension / 4-H	Commentary	*Journal of Extension*
Gonzalez et al. 2020	Not research	Primary	4-H	Literature Review	*Journal of Extension*

The sections that follow review the results these texts on sexuality in agricultural education, first in 4-H contexts and then school-based agricultural education.

Sexuality in 4-H Contexts

Commentaries and Practitioner-Orientated Papers on Sexuality in 4-H. Outside of empirical research, two opinion articles (termed 'commentaries') and two review articles related to LGBTQ youth in 4-H have been published in the *Journal of Extension* and the *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*. All four articles advocated for the adoption of LGBTQ-inclusive practices. Meyers's (2008) commentary detailed his personal experiences as a gay man working in Extension, ultimately arguing that he is deserving of the "same humanity as everyone else" (Meyers, 2008, para. 2). Soule's (2017) comprehensive literature review outlined basic terminology and suggestions for Extension personnel to create inclusive environments for LGBTQ youth, while arguing for the need for research into youth experience. Gonzalez et al. (2020) extend this work to recommendations for systemic advocacy, programming, and professional development. McKee and Bruce's (2019) commentary advocated for similar practitioner practices – such as using gender-inclusive language and normalizing pronoun-

sharing– notably without ever naming how this best practice is designed to support 4-Hers in the LGBTQ community.

Historical and Empirical Research on Sexuality in 4-H. Some historical research on sexuality in 4-H has been published outside of the field of agricultural education. Gabriel Rosenberg's (2016a) pathbreaking work on 4-H, sexuality, and the State traced the history of the organization, arguing that gender roles, reproduction, and sexuality operate alongside agricultural technologies to produce the modern landscape of agribusiness and State control. 4-H began in 1902 and was designed to meet USDA and Cooperative Extension's priorities of disseminating technological innovations (Rosenberg, 2016a). 4-H clubs took off as models for successful rural outreach and have been leveraged over time to meet different ends. For example, in the 1930s, 4-H refocused to bolster the rural birth rate in response to USDA economists' assessment that, as cited in Rosenberg (2016b), "the nation faced a dire crisis of reproduction" which 4-H members could prevent by "starting their own healthy farm families" (Rosenberg, 2016b, p. 88). Starting in the 1930s, 4-H invested significant effort in training rural youth for wholesome marriages. According to Rosenberg (2016b),

> [4-H] Club experts attempted to train rural youth for marriage and 'heterosexual relations,' to contrive rural heterosexual romance, and to educate rural youth about the sexual nature and function of their bodies. This effort circulated and ultimately normalized heterosexuality as a foundation of an idealized rural life. (p. 91)

In attempting to bolster the rural birth rate, 4-H played a pivotal role in creating and reproducing the concept of the heterosexual family farm (Leslie, 2017), where "the economic and biological union between a revenue-producing male 'farmer' and a nurturing 'farmer's wife' constituted both the ideal and normal form of organization for rural life" (Rosenberg, 2016b, p.

88). These values fostered agricultural education spaces that were specifically designed for heterosexual youth. Rosenberg's (2016a, b) work provides important perspectives on the historical structures that gave rise to modern barriers to inclusion in agricultural education. Rosenberg's (2016) historical accounts makes way for other, similar studies of how sexuality organizes and permeates nonformal agricultural education. While outside the scope of Rosenberg's work (2016), FFA shares similar historical and ongoing practices that normalize and promote heterosexuality, such as the pairing of FFA Sweethearts with FFA Sweethunks or FFA Kings (Casey & Moore, 2013). Just as 4-H started investing in heterosexual marriages in the 1930s, all-male FFA memberships began beauty contests to select "pretty young lasses" and "hood ornaments" (as cited in Casey & Moore, 2013) to serve as chapter representatives in parades and fairs. For nearly 40 years the only role for women in FFA was FFA Sweetheart (Casey & Moore, 2013): a symbol of heterosexuality and male desire. Yet Rosenberg's (2016a) analysis of sexuality and agricultural history has not yet been modeled in agricultural education research nor in the context of FFA.

While Rosenberg's work is situated in the field of History, there are a small number of non-peer reviewed, unpublished studies that originate from within agricultural education that directly relate to sexuality and 4-H. One of the earliest studies was Soder's (2009) unpublished thesis, a quantitative survey of State 4-H Leaders in Ohio. Soder sought to assess leaders' readiness to support gay and lesbian youth, operationalized as basic knowledge of sexual minorities, measures of homophobia, and self-reported implementation of inclusive best practices. Soder (2009) reported that State 4-H leaders showed lower levels of knowledge about LGBTQ identities and issues than other educators, as well as varying levels of homophobia and best practice implementation, moderated by leaders' political orientation and rurality. Soder's

study, although only 12 years old, represents one of the earliest empirical works with a singular focus on serving LGBTQ youth.

Nearly ten years later, another unpublished master's project investigated questions related to sexuality and 4-H. Swires (2018) surveyed and interviewed Pennsylvania 4-H educators and volunteers to understand educator needs for serving LGBTQ youth. She found while most respondents reported feeling comfortable working with LGBTQ youth, participants generally overestimated knowledge of the community while scoring low in basic knowledge of LGBTQ terminology. This lack of knowledge contributed, in part, to a culture where sexuality was not discussed in public, and conversations about diversity did not include sexual minorities. Educators expressed the belief that "ag kids aren't gay" (Swires, 2018, p. 29), and that even if they were, 4-H was not "the right program to help LGBTQ youth come to grips with their own sexuality" (p. 31). Swires's (2018) work points to how research can explore the organizational structure of 4-H, how it constrains and empowers LGBTQ youth, and what can be done to make agricultural education more inclusive.

A third unpublished master's project explored modern barriers to inclusion in 2019. Using qualitative methods of county-level Florida 4-H Extension faculty, Poliseno (2019) found different levels of acceptance for LGBTQ youth based on the rurality of the program, religious and political beliefs of members and volunteers, and race of the youth, with White LGBTQ 4-Hers being generally more accepted than youth of color of any sexuality. While 4-H faculty spoke of the importance of sense of belonging for youth and had some level of familiarity with the LGBTQ acronym, participants lacked familiarity with LGBTQ terminology, skills to communicate with LGBTQ youth, and spoke of a dearth of university policies and practical

guidelines to meet LGBTQ youth needs. Poliseno (2019) concluded with a call for systematic 4-H needs assessments with intersectional analyses of race, religion, and sexuality.

Research into Sexuality in School-based Agricultural Education and FFA

While a small number of studies directly address questions of sexuality in the context of 4-H, only Moore et al.'s, (2001) published study of teacher attitudes, along with Swinehart's (2013) and Austin's (2018) unpublished theses broach sexuality in school-based agricultural education. These studies identify barriers preventing the full inclusion for LGBTQ students. Generally, the studies found LGBTQ students encounter teachers who are uncomfortable working with them and peers that believe in inclusion 'in general' or in theory but are less likely to embrace LGBTQ peers or FFA leaders.

The only empirical, peer-reviewed study investigating any aspect of youth sexual orientation was Moore et al. (2001) survey of Michigan agriscience teachers' definitions of and attitudes toward diversity. The authors found high school agriscience teachers reported varied levels of comfort working with diverse students and colleagues. However, when asked if they would like to work alongside people with different characteristics, 65% of agriscience teachers said they would not like to work with students with a different sexual orientation, and 57% would not be comfortable talking to someone with a different sexual orientation. While most teachers reported appreciating differences between different racial groups, genders, and religions, the lowest appreciation for difference was between LGBTQ people and heterosexuals. Compared to all aspects of identity included in the survey (e.g. race, sex, etc.), agriscience teachers were the most uncomfortable and least likely to want to work with LGBTQ students. While teachers' attitudes may have changed over time, there has been no published research on the topic in the 20 years since Moore et al. (2001).

Swinehart's (2013) unpublished master's thesis surveyed students in three high school agriculture programs to explore how environmental factors impacts student participation. While sexuality was not a primary variable of interest, one item in the survey asked students to consider if FFA was welcoming to students of different sexual orientations. While the participants expressed the general belief that "Agricultural Education *should* [emphasis added] welcome any student who is interested to participate in activities" (p. 49), students were less likely to agree agricultural education actually *does* welcome students regardless of their sexual orientation.

An unwelcoming environment for LGBTQ students in agricultural education classrooms was reaffirmed by Austin (2018). Austin's unpublished master's thesis surveyed Kentucky secondary agriculture students to understand how sexuality, race, and farm background moderate peer inclusion. She constructed mock profiles of students and asked participants to rate whether the mock students should be included in the school, agricultural education classroom, FFA membership, FFA leadership roles, or as a roommate on a trip. The 'gay' mock students were ranked lowest out of every other demographic combination, reflecting participants' "dislike of mock student profiles labeled as gay" (Austin, 2018, p. 89). While survey participants were generally accepting of the existence of a hypothetical gay student in their school at large, students had particularly low levels of acceptance for gay students as FFA chapter president or as a roommate on a trip. Austin's (2018) study extended Moore et al.'s (2001) work to document how teacher discomfort with LGBTQ students persists 17 years later among agricultural students, and how FFA's social dynamics are often unwelcoming for sexual minority youth.

Queering Agricultural Education Research

The 11 commentaries, literature reviews, historical papers, and empirical studies reviewed in this philosophical paper are critical pieces of scholarship for educators and

researchers aiming to understand the experiences of sexual minorities in agricultural education. Following Sedgwick's (1990) framework and queering what counts as academic literature resulted in inclusion of five unpublished sexuality studies, four non-empirical publications, and one study published outside the field. These texts collectively identify persistent barriers to enacting inclusive environments for LGBTQ youth in agricultural education; data that are not represented in traditionally defined extant literature. Results of these studies address the immediate need for understanding more about LGBTQ youth in agricultural education. Assembling these 11 works as a body of literature reveals how the authors navigate the landscape of agricultural education in a way that allows them to address questions of sexuality. When LGBTQ authors and subjects are not able to be 'out' and be published in the primary journals of the field, two broad responses emerge. First, direct studies of LGBTQ issues continue to exist outside the journals. Second, authors publishing in the journals address sexuality in coded ways. Authors employed queer citational practices by citing non-normative texts as legitimate sources of academic knowledge, and engaged in unique rhetorical strategies, such as naming and addressing discomfort to disarm a presumably unwilling audience. These responses are not mutually exclusive though, and many authors (e.g. Soder, 2009) employ a multitude of strategies to navigate the challenges of conducting research on LGBTQ topics. Queer theorists understand the forced maneuvering through open secrets, coded knowledge, the 'unsayable', secret knowledge as uniquely queer forms of oppression, distinct from racial, gender, or class oppression (Sedgwick, 1990). While the strategies employed by authors allow for this maneuvering, they are no substitute for addressing the root cause of the issues. In the sections that follow, queer theory is used to lay bare the tensions between root issues in the discipline (challenges to inclusion) and the strategies employed by authors (advancing inclusion) to

navigate them. These challenges and strategies are highlighted in three topic areas: (1) the positioning of LGBTQ authors and subjects in the field, (2) challenges in the intersectional representations of queer topics and individuals, and (3) trends in conceptual framing.

Positioning LGBTQ Authors and Subjects in Agricultural Education

LGBTQ subjects largely exist at the margins of the field in unpublished manuscripts. It is difficult to advance more inclusive research when such studies are not readily cited, are published outside the field, or findings are selectively taken up to avoid discussions of sexuality. These challenges point to the issues that occur when LGBTQ research and researchers are not getting published in canonical journals in agricultural education, which are prioritized as the primary source of knowledge for the field. However, the authors of these texts queer agricultural education research by engaging in queer citational practices and rhetorical strategies to confer status on marginal texts and include LGBTQ-related analyses in canonical Extension journals, respectively. By queering the taken-for-granted philosophies of the profession, these authors forward research and writings on inclusion in the profession.

Challenges to Inclusion: Publication Status and Citation. A study's publication status, as variably unpublished, published in canonical journals in the field, and published in journals outside the field, may be the result of complex factors, but impacts the field nonetheless. All four empirical studies with a primary focus on sexuality are currently unpublished. Multiple factors influence whether studies get carried through to peer-reviewed publication, particularly master's theses. The particular reasons behind publication status of these papers are beyond the scope of this philosophical paper and cannot be answered through this analysis. Looking at the landscape of the field and the positioning of the texts, however, raises important questions about what kind of work is, and is not, published in agricultural education and then who it is, or is not cited by

(Linder et al., 2020; Settle et al., 2020). Sedgwick's (1990) framework points to the ways that writing openly as a queer author – for example, Soder's (2009) identification of a partner with a traditionally masculine name in the acknowledgements section – can factor into what is included and excluded from the traditional disciplinary canon. Setting aside questions as to why, being unpublished negatively impacts the field's inclusion efforts.

Few of these authors cited each other despite covering remarkably similar questions, having similar objectives, and documenting extensive literature review methods. Yet, because most of these studies are unpublished, they are not peer reviewed, not in the field's major journals, and many are not indexed by major search engines. These factors, combined with historical issues around inadequate indexing of interdisciplinary journals that include women's, gender, and sexuality studies (Gerhard et al., 1993), suggest it is incredibly likely that other unpublished studies exist and were not reviewed in this paper for the same reasons. The lack of published, peer reviewed research and support documents often led authors to the incorrect conclusion that "the key objectives in this project have not been explored in the past" (Swires, 2018, p. 8), even though some studies with similar objectives were written since 2009. Publication status then impacts the ability of researchers to build upon prior findings or situate new research in a relevant body of literature. As unpublished theses, the findings are unlikely to be taken up by practitioners who seek to implement evidence-based interventions for inclusion. Lack of publication and citation negatively impacts researchers individually and the profession at large.

In addition to publication, citation is taken as an assumed proxy for measuring impact, relevance, and importance, with implications not only for hiring, promotion, tenure, and other aspects of performance evaluation[…] the choices we make about whom to cite – and who is

then left out of the conversation – directly impact the cultivation of a rich and diverse discipline, and the reproduction of [disciplinary] knowledge itself. (Mott & Cockayne, 2017, p. 955). These unpublished studies remain nearly invisible to the researchers and practitioners who have demonstrated interest in the findings and slow the discipline's movement towards inclusion.

Challenges to Inclusion: Disciplinary Silos and Selective Uptake of Work. Even if studies are published there are issues around disciplinary uptake of research published outside the field. Despite Rosenberg's (2016a) relevance to other academic fields his work has largely been ignored in agricultural education. *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America* has been extensively reviewed (e.g., Clark, 2016; Roberts, 2016) and cited (e.g., Gill-Peterson, 2018; Malitoris, 2019) in journals related to History and Agricultural History. While it does break through the 'official' disciplinary discourse of agricultural education, it is through a singular book review (Elliott-Engle, 2017) and passing reference by a single study (Arnold, 2018), where there was selective uptake of only the historical account, depoliticized and divorced from Rosenberg's analysis of sexuality. The result is that Rosenberg (2016a) is largely not referenced in the papers that address questions of sexuality and 4-H (e.g. Soule, 2017; Swires, 2018; Austin, 2018; Poliseno, 2019). Like the unpublished studies, the work published outside the field is often not reaching the authors and practitioners interested in inclusion.

Advancing Inclusion: Queer Methods of Situating in the Discipline. Without a clear body of literature to draw upon within the field, authors of these LGBTQ focused papers engaged in unique strategies to tie their work to the discipline. In many academic papers, the literature review contextualizes a study by situating the author and research question in a relevant disciplinary and scholarly community (Goodman et al., 2014). In these papers, however, authors situated themselves in the discipline by going to great lengths to describe their *unsuccessful*

searches for relevant literature in agricultural education. For example, Poliseno (2019) and Soder (2009) both explicitly named agricultural education journals and more than half a dozen databases (including 4-H practitioner databases) that have not published or indexed research on LGBTQ youth. This rhetorical move is important. Both authors have literature reviews that primarily draw from other fields (e.g. education, psychology, public health). By naming agricultural education journals and databases that do not have LGBTQ research, the authors frame the papers as relevant to the discipline. This method allows the authors to situate inclusion work as relevant to the discipline when appears to be no relevant prior literature.

Advancing Inclusion: Queer Citational Practices. For some authors, the lack of published, peer-reviewed research in the field led them to engage in queer citational practices by bringing in non-traditional sources. Alongside peer-reviewed, published studies, the authors cited senate committee meeting notes (Soder, 2009), non-academic presentations (Swires, 2018) organizational non-discrimination policies (Soule, 2007), popular press articles (Swires, 2018), governmental websites (Soder, 2009) mission statements (Swires, 2018), unpublished studies (Soule, 2007), and practitioner newsletters (Soder, 2009), among other atypical sources. Some authors went as far as teasing out – like we have in this philosophical paper – studies that use survey instruments where even just *one* question might be tangentially related to sexuality, or identifying a newsletter that references an unpublished curriculum which cannot be accessed, but might relate to LGBTQ youth (Soder, 2009).

For example, Soder (2009) identified a 2004 special issue of the University of Maine Extension's *Family Issues* magazine that focused on creating safe spaces for LGBTQ youth and referenced an unpublished curriculum to support LGBTQ youth. Viewed through the analytical lens of queer theory, Soder (2009) queers these binaries of knowledge, rendering non-academic

newsletters and websites as legitimate sources of knowledge through their inclusion in his literature review. Yet even as Soder (2009) blurs these binaries between official and unofficial knowledge, his work is similarly situated outside of what might be considered traditional academic venues. Yet in networks of queer academics and academics who queer what counts as official knowledge, it is circulated and cited (e.g., Soule, 2017), just as Soder circulated and cited other queer and non-traditional sources. Soder's (2009) queer citational strategy of referencing a newsletter that mentions an unpublished curriculum is critical for two reasons. First, Soder (2009) demonstrates educator interest in supporting LGBTQ youth in 4-H extends to the early 2000s – over a decade before gay marriage would be nationally legalized – and aligns his work in the discipline. Second, in some small way, this queer citational practice grants authority to texts at the margins and establishes a precedent for published works like Soule (2007) to engage in similar citational practices. As Mott and Cockayne (2017) have suggested "citational practices can be a tool for either the reification of, or resistance to, unethical hierarchies of knowledge production" (p. 956). By queering citational practices, the authors extend the discipline's knowledge of LGBTQ issues and confer status on LGBTQ publications and authors through citation.

Advancing Inclusion: Queer Rhetorical Strategies. Authors who brought LGBTQ topics into published works in canonical extension education journals employed unique framing to overcome anticipated resistance and advance the conversation around inclusion. Among the authors who published commentaries and literature reviews (McKee & Bruce, 2019; Meyer, 2008; Soule, 2017), all four used rhetorical strategies that identified and addressed anticipated reader discomfort. McKee and Bruce (2019) identified potential resistance from educators in implementing best practices for LGBTQ youth: "*Although doing this can feel awkward,*

[emphasis added] Extension professionals can…" (para. 6). This discomfort was first articulated 11 years earlier by Meyer: "While it is *a very uncomfortable subject* [emphasis added] for many…" (2008, para. 1). Soule (2017) went so far as to devote a full page of justification in a section titled "Why Should Extension Personnel Read This Article?" (p. 104). While justifying the importance is a critical part of academic writing, the creation of a standalone section framed in terms of resistance is atypical in the *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension.* Soule's (2017) extensive argument about the relevance of sexuality might point to the author's, editors', and/or reviewers' experiences of and assumptions about the typical audience of agricultural education journals. The rhetorical moves employed by all four authors suggest they anticipated a potentially hostile audience, alluding to barriers to publishing research on sexuality in extension journals – underscoring Sedgwick's (1990) analysis of how queer voices and issues are often excluded from the literature. Yet, by naming and addressing potential sources of audience discomfort, the authors were able to put forward published works on LGBTQ subjects in canonical Extension journals and spur disciplinary conversation on inclusion.

Intersectional Representation of LGBTQ Topics and Individuals

There are complex tensions about the representation – or lack thereof – of LGBTQ people among these studies on sexuality in agricultural education. While sexuality is one important lens to understand a person's experience, individuals occupy unique vantage points through a combination of intersecting identities, including race, age, gender, and sexual orientation, among others (Crenshaw, 1989). The studies overwhelmingly focus on adults to understand youth issues, fail to ask or report sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) data, and fail to recruit diverse participants to the studies. These challenges point to issues around research design, recruitment methods, and reporting data that fail to account for the complex

issues that researchers and LGBTQ participants navigate in conducting research. However, the authors of these texts queer these methods by utilizing scavenging methodologies and strategically engaging in acts of visibility and invisibility to produce initial research that, while not ideal, begins to address these issues of inclusion.

Challenges to Inclusion: Omission of LGBTQ Youth. While the majority of the six empirical studies were framed around the LGBTQ youth experience, none of the 4-H studies involve youth, and nothing about the direct experience of youth was explored. Only Swinehart's (2013) and Austin's (2018) studies involved youth participants. In both, however, youth participants were never asked (or data were never reported) about their sexual orientation. These methodological choices make it impossible to disaggregate data and identify unique LGBTQ agriculture students' experiences or know if LGBTQ students were even in the studies. Both surveys collected extensive demographic data. Yet data on sexuality, a primary variable of interest, were not collected. As a result, the findings have little explanatory power regarding the actual lives and experiences of LGBTQ people (Beaulieu-Prévost, & Fortin, 2015).

Challenges to Inclusion: Omission of LGBTQ Adults. The omission of demographic data about sexuality extended to the studies of adults. Participants were not asked about their sexual orientation in three of the four surveys. In the one study that did, "the only sexual identity […] that met the five subject requirement for reporting was heterosexual," (Soder, 2009, p. 61) suggesting that all or nearly all of the 47 participants were straight. While most instruments asked about gender, the diversity of the LGBTQ community was not reflected in survey options. For example, Swires's (2018) demographic question about respondent's gender forced a response between four options: "Male" "Female" "Gender Questioning" or "Other", but most instruments only included the binary "Male" and "Female." It is unclear then if a single member of the

LGBTQ community was represented in these studies about LGBTQ people. This omission raises important red flags about how data are interpreted and used. For example, Swinehart's (2013) instrument specifically included one question for students to indicate agreement with the statement "Agricultural Education welcomes all students to participate in activities regardless of their sexual orientation" (p. 49). The author interpreted the generally high level of agreement with this and other statements about the environment to conclude that "Agricultural Education welcomes all students to have an equal chance to participate in activities." (p. 69). This point is presented uncritically, without examining perspectives of students outside of agricultural education, and without collecting sexual orientation and gender identity demographic data to identify LGBTQ students who may have differing perspectives. Without collecting or reporting SOGI data, LGBTQ youth are made invisible in the studies that are theoretically about them.

Challenges to Inclusion: Overrepresentation of White Participants. Just as the majority – if not all – study participants were straight, the majority were also white. Participant's race and ethnicity were also not always reported. This failure to recruit, report, and disaggregate data by race reflects an assumption that the results "pertain to people regardless of race" (Helms, 1993, p. 243) despite evidence otherwise. This is particularly problematic given that intersections of race and sexual orientation influence individuals' experiences of agricultural education (Poliseno, 2019; Martin 2020). There are complex issues around who is and who is not represented in the emerging scholarship on sexuality in agricultural education.

Advancing Inclusion: Scavenging Methodologies. Studies that largely focused on straight white adults to understand LGBTQ youth are worthy of critique, but simultaneously are important examples of scavenging methodologies that enable inclusion research in a difficult context. Murphy and Lugg (2016) identified the challenges of collecting data on LGBTQ

students. Researchers are routinely denied access to schools. Recruitment is stymied by a systematic inability to identify LGBTQ participants. Possible participants intentionally hide their sexuality in educational contexts. Schools hesitate to allow the direct inquiry into sexuality. Even processes of informed consent typically required by institutional review boards render studies of LGBTQ youth dangerous or impossible (Gamarel et al., 2014). 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. This is particularly appropriate as "scavenger methodology that 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). While studying straight, white, adults is no substitute for recruiting a diverse pool of LGBTQ youth, these choices can be interpreted as scavenging (Murphy & Lugg, 2016): innovative strategies to do inclusive research on a population that has been excluded from traditional studies. By scavenging and piecing together data, the authors advanced early inclusion research and demonstrated the need for more robust analyses with LGBTQ youth.

Advancing Inclusion: Strategic Employment of Visibility and Invisibility. Authors advanced inclusion research by engaging in practices that may have avoided outing participants. Tensions around visibility and invisibility arise repeatedly in LGBTQ studies of agricultural education. In all but one study reviewed in this paper, participants were either not asked about sexual orientation, or sexual orientation was not reported by the authors. This oversight – the invisibilization of LGBTQ people in agricultural education studies of LGBTQ people – raises significant concerns about how these studies may result in research, policies, and pedagogies that further problematic assumptions about LGBTQ people. Invisibility oppresses and dehumanizes

LGBTQ people in multiple ways: (a) enforced invisibility through explicit repression, (b) concealing one's sexuality (being in the closet), (c) normalization of schooling spaces to invisibilize LGBTQ people, and (d) implicit abjection when there are no words to describe anything outside of 'normal' (Rosiek, 2016). To invisibilize, then, is to marginalize LGBTQ people and their contributions. In the studies reviewed here, all authors invisibilized LGBTQ participants, either by not asking about sexuality or failing to recruit enough LGBTQ people to report data on (e.g., Soders, 2009).

While there is no evidence to confirm the rationale behind these decisions to not gather or report SOGI data, queer theory makes space to understand this as potentially intentional. By not gathering or reporting SOGI data, the authors avoided potentially outing LGBTQ participants who may be one of few out LGBTQ people in their sample. As explained by Dwyer and Ball (2020), navigating visibility is a safety issue:

Decisions around whether to be visible as queer, in what contexts, and how to do so, must be understood as negotiations of safety for LGBTI [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Intersex] people. […] This means that depending on the context, LGBTI people are constantly navigating the tensions between being visible enough to avoid social and legal invisibility, and avoiding becoming hypervisible, which would draw unwarranted and unsafe attention to themselves as LGBTI people. (p.275).

Perhaps by not gathering or reporting SOGI data the authors avoided exposing LGBTQ participants to harassment or unwarranted attention. These concerns are amplified exponentially for LGBTQ youth of color, whose responses or participation might be implied or assumed if demographic data were reported without care. Austin (2018) hints at this: "due to the questions [sic] personal nature and out of respect for student confidentiality, no geographic identifiers were

requested. However, due to the sensitive nature of the questions the results are at risk of misreporting due to embarrassment of uncomfortability" (p. 9). Taken together, Austin (2018) suggested enforced invisibility, by not asking certain demographic questions, strategically avoids making youth hypervisible, and also recognizes youth may engage in their own invisibilizing practices by misreporting their own demographic data to avoid hypervisibility. While these strategies dehumanize and invisibilize LGBTQ youth, they also protect LGBTQ participants who may be hypervisible in small counties and states. Therefore, by managing issues of visibility and hypervisibility the authors put forward inclusion research in a way that protects the most vulnerable participants.

Conceptual Framing of Sexuality Studies in Agricultural Education

Deficit frameworks are commonly employed in writing about LGBTQ youth in agricultural education, but these frameworks are inappropriate to understand the multidimensional realities and assets of LGBTQ youth. The use of these models points to issues related to not having a disciplinary basis for LGBTQ research. The authors of these texts overcame this challenge by situating their work in common transdisciplinary narratives to advance inclusion.

Challenges to Inclusion: Deficit Models. Embedded throughout the framing of these sexuality studies in agricultural education are assumptions about the populations being studied. LGBTQ and other marginalized youth are frequently viewed through deficit frameworks, which assume they are deficient compared to their straight or majority peers (Ladson-Billings, 2006). For example, Swires (2018) employed a deficit model to construct the argument that LGBTQ youth are 'at risk' throughout her research and accompanying curriculum. For example, the worksheet 'Ag Kids are LGBTQ+,' listed "The Facts:" ten bullet points outlining the negative

outcomes of being LGBTQ, including suicide, isolation, death, bullying, and homelessness. Deficit models are pervasive in these early studies of LGBTQ youth in agricultural education. While there is a clear case for studies that identify the injustices LGBTQ people face in agricultural education, there is a compelling need for studies of LGBTQ students of agriculture that move beyond "stockpiles of examples of injustice" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 223) that only seek to "elicit stories of pain from communities that are not White, not wealthy, and not straight" (p. 226). Instead of focusing solely on what is lacking in these communities, another more affirmative approach that could be used is asset-based research. There is ample opportunity then to center more multidimensional accounts of LGBTQ life and critically envision a future of LGBTQ youth research in agricultural education that moves beyond deficit frameworks.

Advancing Inclusion: Aligning with Transdisciplinary Trends and Narratives. Deficit frameworks are pervasive in educational research and, while not ideal, their use allows agricultural education researchers to align themselves with a longstanding disciplinary narrative in the broader field. Deficit models emerged in the 1960's in response to desegregation and dominated the educational research and pedagogical landscape for decades (Kirk & Goon, 1975; Paris, 2012). While these models have been critiqued and new models have been developed, deficit frameworks have had lasting impacts on the educational research landscape (Paris, 2012). Payne and Smith (2016) argued "mainstream educational conversations around queer identities and education are dominated by risk- and deficit- based interpretations of how [LGBTQ] students experience school. That is, LGBTQ youth are understood as easy targets, victims, and different in ways that demand their peers and teachers express tolerance and empathy" (p. 127). Most studies agricultural education researchers cited from outside the profession were informed by deficit models. To use a deficit framework, then, is to align the study with common

transdisciplinary narratives in the broader fields of education and science communication, among others. Authors were able to draw upon theories, methods, and framings with a 60-year history. Without releasing the critique of the models specifically, the strategy lent legitimacy to the authors who had less relevant literature to draw from within agricultural education. By drawing upon a common transdisciplinary narrative, authors demonstrated their ties to a longstanding history in other fields. This strategy is mirrored in this philosophical paper – invoking the disciplinary narrative around inclusion to frame this paper rather than engaging with broader conversations around justice or transformation (e.g. Davis, 2020 Dunne, 2009; Harris, Barone, & Patton Davis, 2015). Drawing upon transdisciplinary narratives, managing issues of visibility, scavenging methodologies, queer rhetorical strategies, and citational practices together advance what it means to be inclusive – not just for LGBTQ youth – but for the profession writ large.

Conclusion

A culture of discrimination has existed throughout the history of agricultural education, as seen through gendered and racialized policies around membership and participation. To address these inequities, the agricultural education profession has spent more than 30 years grappling with how to provide agricultural education for all. Yet in all that time, only one single empirical study was published in the primary journals of the field that even bares passing acknowledgement to the LGBTQ community. In this philosophical paper, we leveraged queer theory to queer what counts as 'the literature' and make visible a nascent collection of texts on sexuality in agricultural education. When taken together as a body of literature, there are commonalities in how the authors engaged in complex maneuvering to put forward these studies. These strategies have made it possible for scholars to do work on sexuality in agricultural education and push the profession to be more inclusive. While there is an argument to be made that these strategies can

be leveraged to advance studies of inclusion in agricultural education, it is no substitute for addressing root issues: LGBTQ authors and subjects are at the margins of the field; transdisciplinary research on sexuality is not referenced in agricultural education; organizational barriers and individual risk constrain the direct study of LGBTQ youth; and agricultural education lacks a disciplinary basis for methods and frameworks for studying LGBTQ youth. By leveraging queer theory in this philosophical paper, we have explored some conditions that *create and uphold* this transdisciplinary silence (Rosenberg, 2016a) on sexuality and agricultural education. Just as researchers rose 30 years ago to address the climate of discrimination, there is a present need to design research, policies, and programs that are inclusive of the hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ youth in agricultural education.

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Chapter 3. An Emerging Conceptual Model of LGBTQ Youth Organizational Access in 4-H

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 (Murray et al., 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. However, the number of LGBTQ youth currently enrolled in 4-H is not currently known, as questions about sexual identity and trans-inclusive gender identity questions are not routinely asked or reported in the literature.

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 existing research focuses on LGBTQ student support in the context of 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. Conceptual 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 theoretical and conceptual frameworks 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 proposed conceptual model of the affordances and constraints 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, issues in memory recollection, experiences of trauma, 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, cisgender, queer/lesbian woman 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 = 3) 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 in this 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 youths 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 proposed conceptual 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 Kevin:

> So just to kind of understand my high school, we had one openly gay kid. And Evan was very demonstrative about that. 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 Evan 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, I was like, technically that dress meets school rules, so go for it, Evan. Then there was a rule about no wearing dresses. […] Evan 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, Kevin 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. 4-H provided a counterspace where they could more safely exist, like Bryan explained:

> I just never felt like being gay in 4-H ever created any challenges for me. I feel like it definitely created challenges for me in high school, middle school, but I did not experience in 4-H really.

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 Bryan explains:

> My friends at school 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 a very involved kid that 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 Alan 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 Chesapeake on

> the side of the river. And so very much I live in what we call southeastern Virginia, about 10 minutes from Chesapeake, Virginia and it's very much a suburban bedroom type community. And so, growing up in the middle of the suburbs, I had grandparents on both sides, maternal and paternal side that had working farms with livestock and in Virginia, tobacco, of course. 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. At the time I was about nine years old - when you join 4-H in Virginia - I was not affiliated strongly with anything else such as sports or 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 Alan 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. Alan'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 James 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 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, James.' 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.

For others, like Bryan, 4-H was a route to engage in caretaking relationships with animals, which came with social-emotional benefits and the ability to work independently.

I've always been fascinated with how things grow and develop and I also am very much a caregiver. So when we started getting very competitive and showing nationally there was nothing I loved more than getting up at 4:30 in the morning and going out and washing my heifers. There was just something so therapeutic about it, something that was totally yours, I think was very therapeutic.

While it was the animals specifically that hooked James and Bryan, 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 James, 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 Crystal, 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 James 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 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 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, James said:

> There is no way I would have come out in that community, period. Super rural, very conservative, you know? even though it was Pennsylvania 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.

James 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 Crystal, 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. […] 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.

An Emerging Conceptual Model of 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.

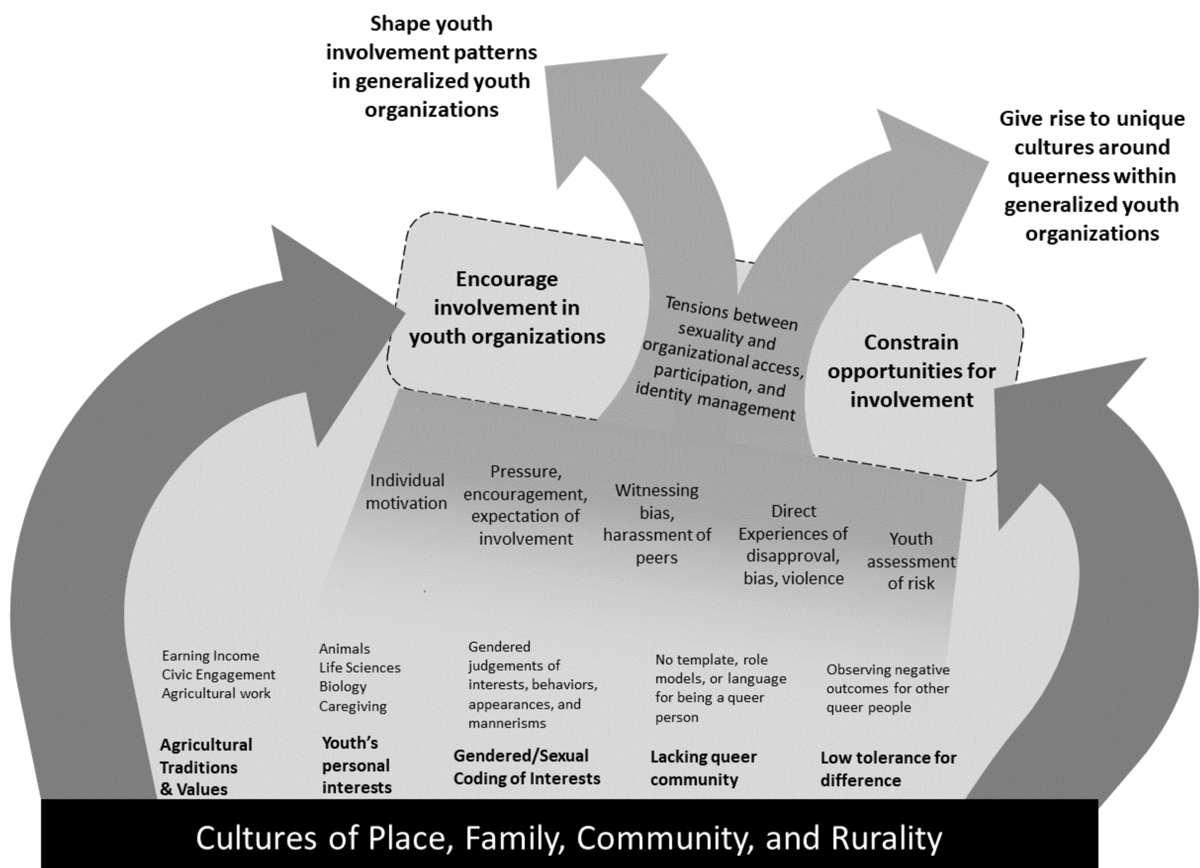

Figure 1. A proposed conceptual model of LGBTQ Youth Organizational Access in 4-H.

Discussion

Sexual and gender identities play complex roles in how LGBTQ youth access generalized youth development programs. This conceptual 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. Kevin's story of Evan's struggle in school points to the issues LGBTQ youth face in rural communities, and how that bias may impact their participation in schools and youth groups. For the LGBTQ people in this study, growing up in places with low tolerance for difference influenced their perception of school climate and the types of activities that they elected to pursue.

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 (California 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 (California 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 May 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 may be 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 Kevin 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 (Murray et al., 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 an emerging conceptual model of how LGBTQ youth encounter unique environments of affordances and constraint that shape their organizational access and involvement. For educators, this study can point to potential areas of opportunity: how can 4-H more directly support youth interest within and *beyond* gendered expectations? How are these messages encoded and, critically, challenged in 4-H? How can 4-H serve a key role in supporting LGBTQ youth who may lack access to other resources? And finally, how can 4-H be attentive to the needs of LGBTQ youth, knowing that many are not open about their sexuality in the context of the programming? This conceptual 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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Chapter 4. Context-Adaptive Strategies of LGBTQ Youth in a Positive Youth Development Program: 4-H as a Site of Queer Survival and Thrival

Introduction

Over the last three years, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth have been increasingly targeted by hostile educational policies in the United States (GLAAD, 2023) on top of a frequently negative school climate for queer and trans youth, particularly in rural areas (De Pedro et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018; Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Rural LGBTQ youth encounter more negative school climate, with “lower levels of school connectedness, fewer caring adult relationships, and less meaningful participation at school than urban LGBTQ youth” (Choi et al., 2017, p.5). They experience increased incidence of biased language, victimization, and discriminatory policies compared to their peers who live in urban or suburban areas (Kosciw et al., 2020). The effects of this environment are significant: LGBTQ youth experience increased rates of homelessness and suicidality, declining school performance, and other negative outcomes because of this oppression (Bidell, 2014; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014; Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002). Generalized positive youth development programs, like 4-H, may present a key opportunity to serve the needs of LGBTQ youth, particularly in the absence of LGBTQ-specific programs and other kinds of supports in rural communities (Fish, 2020; Murray et al., *In Press*). LGBTQ youth may turn towards out of school youth programs, like 4-H, in the presence of a hostile school climate (Murray et al., *In Press*). Yet there is little empirical research into the experiences of LGBTQ people in generalized youth development programs like 4-H.

Educators and administrators have made significant strides over the last few years to advocate for LGBTQ youth inclusion in 4-H. Work on LGBTQ topics in 4-H, including research

on implementing inclusive language (Hamilton-Honey, 2017; Soule, 2019), supporting organizational change to support queer and trans youth (Elliot-Engel et al., 2021; Gonzales et al., 2020), increasing educator competency (Benge & Howard, 2022), increasing belongingness (Stone et al., 2023) and understanding organizational climate (Rand et al., 2021) provide critical starting points towards the reorientation of 4-H to better serve all youth. LGBTQ youth experience educational spaces and youth organizations differently than their straight and cisgender peers (Kosciw et al., 2020; Murray et al., In Press), and research is needed to better understand how these efforts for inclusion are impacting 4-Hers.

Despite efforts to include LGBTQ youth in 4-H, there have been challenges. Studies of 4-H educators and leaders suggest that adults in 4-H were unprepared to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth: volunteers and staff working in 4-H programs lacked basic knowledge about LGBTQ communities, exhibited homophobia, and did not know how to best support LGBTQ youth (Poliseno, 2019; Swires, 2018; Soder, 2009). At the same time, 4-H nationally lacks policies and practical guidelines that address how LGBTQ youth are included in programming (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Poliseno, 2019), and efforts towards the development of these policies have been curtailed by political pushback (Kaiser, 2023). Nevertheless, 4-H staff remain committed to serving LGBTQ youth and families (Elliott-Engel et al., 2021). Given these challenges to inclusion in 4-H and the cultures of place, community, and rurality (Murray et al., *In Press*), LGBTQ youth in 4-H may have to engage in context-dependent strategies to survive and thrive in the framework of 4-H.

Purpose

LGBTQ youth may have unique experiences that are currently understudied and undertheorized in a 4-H context (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Murray et al., 2020; Soule, 2017), given that most of the extant literature around sexual and gender identity and 4-H focuses on the knowledge of heterosexual educators with only a few exceptions (e.g., Hilpp, 202; Rand et al., 2021). There is a specific need for asset-based research into LGBTQ youth experiences in 4-H (Fish, 2020; Mallory et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2020) that specifically moves beyond deficit-based frameworks that view LGBTQ youth as lacking. Tensions between sexuality and organizational access, participation, and identity management in 4-H give rise to unique cultures around queerness within generalized youth development organizations (Murray et al., *In Press*). This study seeks to understand how LGBTQ youth experienced 4-H, and the ways in which LGBTQ youth used 4-H to survive and build pathways to thriving. Specifically, the research questions in this study are:

1) What context-adaptive strategies do LGBTQ youth engage in in 4-H?
2) How do theses context-adaptive strategies enable LGBTQ youth to survive and thrive in the context of 4-H?
3) How are these strategies supported by 4-H?

Methods

This study 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 and builds upon the research into organizational access in Murray et al. (*In Press*).

Participants

Participants in this study all self-identified as members of the LGBTQ community, were 18 years of age or older, where enrolled in 4-H as youth, and served as educators/volunteers in 4-H as adults (n = 7). Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience and purposive snowball sampling. For the sample, ages ranged between 18 and 45 at the time of interview with a median age of 32. All of the participants identified as white. The sample consisted of six cisgender men and one cisgender woman. Participants had been enrolled in 4-H programs as young people in Northeast, Midwest, South, and West regions of the U.S. Of the sample, five participants identified as gay, two as queer, one as bisexual, and one as both gay and queer. Participants described the communities they grew up in as rural, suburban, or between rural and suburban. Most participants were not explicitly out – to themselves or others – until after their time in 4-H.

As a vulnerable population in small communities, demographic data are reported in aggregate and additional deidentification measures have been taken, including by altering or removing specific individuals' names, towns, counties, states, universities, roles, and organizations, consistent with best practices for research with vulnerable populations (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Participant self-selection of pseudonyms and pronouns is a methods strategy we have employed elsewhere in the overall inquiry, and participants found it satisfying and empowering. (Murray et al., *In Press*)

Data Collection

Retrospective semi-structured interviews were conducted through either on the phone, in-person, and Zoom in the fall of 2019. Participants were asked to reflect on their time as youth in

4-H, which ranged between 1-27 years earlier. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews ranged between 16 and 52 minutes, with an average length of 35 minutes.

Positionality Statement

I served as the sole interviewer for the investigation. I am a white, cisgender, queer/lesbian woman 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 community in the Appalachian Mountain region of New Jersey. In my youth, I participated in 4-H projects and competed in contests at the state, county, and national level, but was never out about my sexual identity as a youth member of 4-H. Like the participants, I have remained involved in agricultural education as an adult.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was informed by Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and conducted using DeDoose. Grounded theory is used to move beyond description of narratives or phenomena to generate theory for a process or action grounded in data from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Such an approach is necessary to answer the research questions and to identify the strategies used by LGBTQ people to survive and thrive in the 4-H context. In this approach to grounded theory, "theory development [results] from a co-construction process dependent upon researcher interactions with participants and field" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 84). In vivo and process coding were used to develop a list of initial codes (n = 311) that were then collapsed into 57 focused codes, selected for their frequency and salience, and grouped based on their theme, structure, and intent (Saldaña, 2009). These codes were then turned into axial codes in order 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).

Following the procedure outlined in Murray et al. (*In Press*), concept maps and a narrative account of the theoretical codes were taken to member check meetings (n = 3) and community review meetings (n = 3) to explore tentative interpretations and congruency of findings with lived experiences. This constant comparative process involves "going back and forth between the participants […] and then returning to the evolving theory to fill in the gaps and to elaborate on how it works" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 84). A hallmark of grounded theory is the use of reflective and analytic memos to map out the process (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Reflective and analytic memos (n = 20) were created at all junctures of the process (i.e., from interviewing through each stage of analysis, member checking, and correspondence) to reflect on the process and provide space for early and integrated analysis.

Results and Discussion

Queer Ways of Surviving and Pathways to Thriving

LGBTQ youth navigated these complex environments by engaging in strategies that allowed them to survive and put them on pathways towards thriving in the context of 4-H. The sections that follow detail the elements of this theme in turn. Youth sublimated their sexuality in 4-H through busyness, not talking about it, and seeking out desexualized environments. They accepted tolerance in 4-H because they were broadly supported outside their sexuality, received subtle messages of non-support, and lacked the expectation that they would be acknowledged as

LGBTQ people in 4-H. The following sections explore how these context-adaptive strategies are supported by the culture, policies, and structure of 4-H and youths' home communities.

Sublimating Sexuality

LGBTQ youth engaged in a variety of internal and external identity management strategies – conscious decisions about revealing their minority status to themselves or others (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001) – to navigate a challenging context. Many youth took heterosexual attractions as "evidence that [their queerness] wasn't really something I had to think about." When asked if he was accepting of himself as a gay person, James spoke to this:

> I was so far from that [being accepting of myself as a gay person]. But also, I was so far from it, not just in high school, but through college. It was super sublimated and, um, I know that in my thoughts, I knew. But there was no acceptance. Like I had attraction, but I was not acting on that. […] I was still in 'this is weird to me, but I think I have enough of these other attractions and feelings. We're just going to go with that.'

James and Alan explicitly called this process 'sublimation,' while others varyingly referred to it as an act of 'putting off,' 'ignoring it and setting it aside,' 'putting it on hold,' 'letting it be a passing thought' or simply doing things to 'avoid thinking about it.' Youth did what they could to redirect their thoughts about their own sexual identity until a later time. Many described the process as neutral, or not rooted in an active conflict about their sexual identity. Rather, it was a conscious or subconscious decision to not engage with that part of themselves. LGBTQ young people engaged in multiple processes of sublimination to redirect their sexual energies into other pursuits and serve as defense mechanisms while navigating the environment of their youth (Kim et al., 2013). The LGBTQ youth accomplished this through three strategies that were explicitly and implicitly supported in the culture and/or structure of 4-H: busyness, not talking about sexuality, and removing themselves from sexualized environments.

Sublimating Sexuality Through Busyness. 4-H offers a diverse array of ways to be involved (Figure 1) and youth have the ability to be self-directed and choose to participate in multiple ways. Under the umbrella of 4-H, youth can participate in community clubs that engage young people in a variety of individual and group activities across a range of projects, project clubs singularly focused around a specific project area, afterschool clubs that extend in-school curriculum, site-based clubs that are targeted to underserved youth, and school-based projects (Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, 2017). While each state and region's offerings may vary, members are able to participate at the county, state, and national level, each giving them access to different professional development opportunities, mentors, peer groups, resources, and leadership roles.

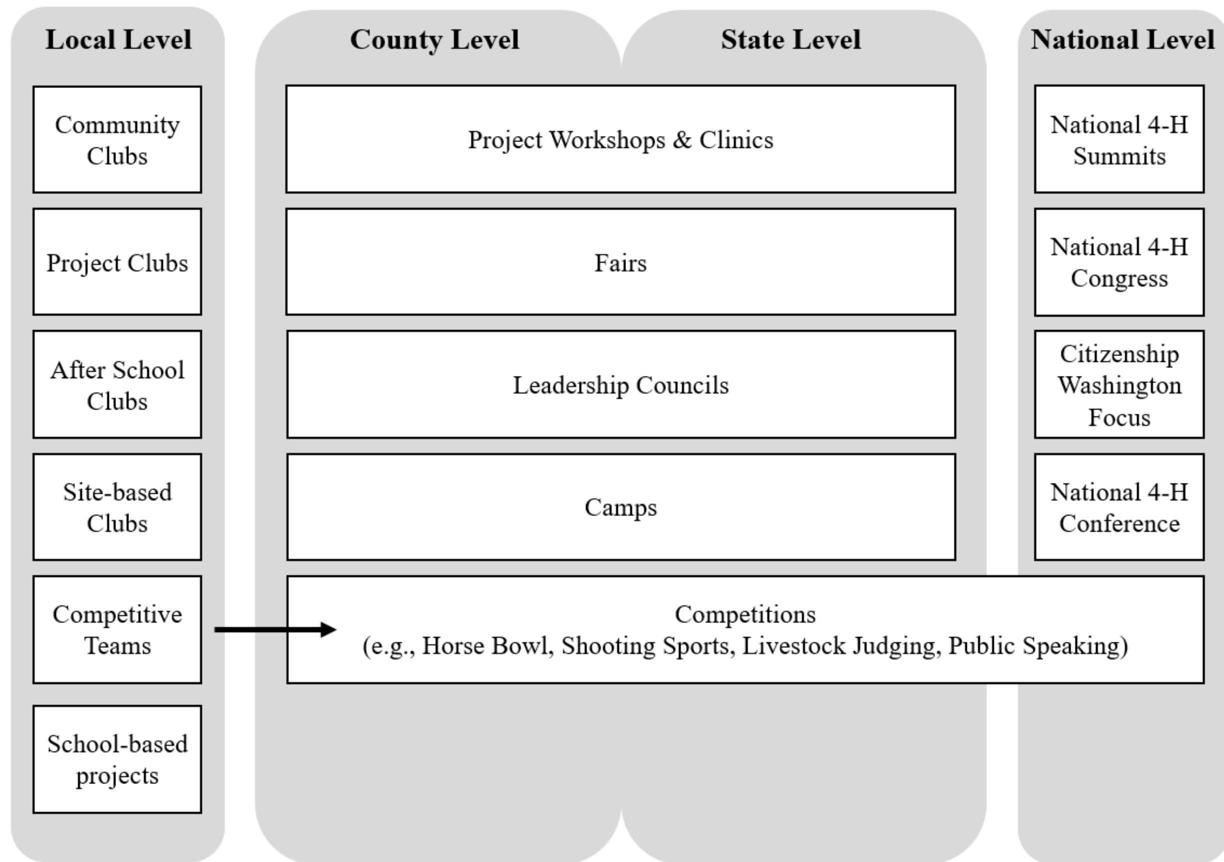

Figure 2. Member involvement opportunities at the local, county, state, and national level for all youth in 4-H

Participants spoke to how the structure of 4-H created an environment where they stayed extremely busy, as one respondent put it "[4-H] allowed me to go from taking care of livestock one day to a club meeting where I was president that evening and then the next day I left to be a counselor at camp for four days." Many members spoke of working on multiple projects concurrently, taking on increasing responsibilities, and being more involved than many of their peers both in and outside 4-H. 4-H valued competition, leadership, and service, especially as youth were deepening their engagement in more projects and at higher organizational levels. For

LGBTQ youth, this combination of structure and values encouraged busyness that also served to help manage their relationship with their sexual identities, as Alan described:

> I think being achievement oriented allowed me to focus on things and kind of divert issues of sexual identity. If I was busy all the time, I didn't have to answer questions about who or what I was dating or when I was dating. If I was going places, I didn't have to worry about, um, spending too much time with any one person and rumors starting or suggestions being made or anything like that. So I think, and it also allowed me to stay busy and sublimate, um, something that I wasn't necessarily comfortable with but also didn't know how to act on: sexual attraction to other males. And so it just kind of let me move the focus off some of those traditional, you know, stereotypical type teenage things to another area.

For Alan, staying busy through 4-H allowed him to sublimate his own sexuality and avoid thinking about his sexual identity while living in a place where there was not an accessible template for being queer. Busyness also allowed him to avoid attracting attention, avoid conversations about dating, and redirect his energy towards succeeding in 4-H. This was echoed in community review meetings. One community member shared that her parents would frequently remark about how she was too busy to date, and she would agree with them, even though she was secretly dating women at the time. For her, busyness was a plausible reason for not dating that she maintained rather than come out to her parents. Crystal elaborated on the complex relationship between sublimating sexuality and busyness after our member check meeting:

> Overall, [I stay busy] because I have a voice in my head that makes me feel like I have to. There's a lot of layers to that. Not acknowledging my sexuality was definitely one layer of it, even now a little bit if I'm honest with myself. I usually think that being busy means I don't have much time for a relationship, but maybe I don't want to have time. I believe that is because I don't feel like I am required to come out to my family until I have a partner.

For many participants, the intertwining of family, place, and 4-H cultures created a space that allowed young people to sublimate their sexuality through busyness in an environment where it felt unsafe to come out or more explicitly acknowledge their queerness.

Sublimating Sexuality by Not Talking About It. Even for those that always accepted that part of themselves, they managed the external perception of their sexuality by not talking about it. As Bryan put it, "I wouldn't say I was ever out, but I was never in either. So as a 4-Her, I think people just knew that I was [gay…] and it was never something that we really talked about." Jasper similarly described how not talking about sexuality in 4-H allowed for it to be an open secret:

> I always felt like [4-H] was a place where I could just be me. I mean, I wasn't fully. I wasn't out. I didn't talk about that side of myself. But I didn't feel bullied or discriminated against or any of those things. I could just be who I was, without the like label, even though probably most people knew. It just wasn't something that we talked about at that point.

For Kevin, the relationship between sublimating his sexuality by not talking about it was rooted in his role in the broader community and in 4-H:

> So since I was in this role in this community... It was just something you didn't really talk about that much. Like you just kind of ignored it and set it to the side.

This strategy of 'not talking about it' as a method to and reason for sublimating one's sexuality was rooted in the intersections of rural and religious culture, as Lee described:

> Again, going back to that cultural divide of 'we acknowledge that you're gay' / 'you don't speak that you're gay' though. Like we don't verbalize that in the world, right. Because we believe [… that] when you say that, you speak things into the world, right? Like [the act of] you speaking it into the world, it comes true. So [if] we don't speak into the world, [then] we can pretend like it's not true. So that's very much a cultural thing. That was very much the way that 'weirdness' in general at that time in the mountains was treated. We acknowledged that you're 'odd.' The 'odd family member' as like the way of working around, but we don't acknowledge what that means. Like [we don't acknowledge what it means] when you're the 'odd family member.' We don't really ask why they've never dated a girl because we know why. They're like 'it's just because they're kind of odd.' So there's like a whole world of 'odd people' from that time period that all know what that means. Right? We all know when you're the odd member of the family, [we know] what that means. It's so weird because it's even when you're young. Like when you're like six and seven, certain people in your family are designated as like the odd people, right? Like, even as children, even as a seven-year-old, they're like, 'Well that's the… you know… he's kind of… he's *ooooddd*.' You recognize even a seven year's old sexuality, but they don't recognize [it is 'gay']. They recognize it as 'being

odd.' So we know what that means. We know what that means about that seven-year-old, we know what that means about that 15-year-old and we know that means about that 35-year-old. But you don't say that out loud. You don't say it out loud!

Since the cultures of place, families, and communities were reinforced and replicated in the context of 4-H, 'not talking about it' served as a default way of addressing 'weirdness.'

For the LGBTQ youth, their participation in 4-H allowed them to shift conversations and focus from dating and sexuality to shared interests. Many participants spoke to this: "[we were] in that specific environment of 'we're talking about goats here'" or we were "here to do woodworking – not here to gossip, we were here to teach a skill." 4-H rewarded those who focused on their projects through awards, recognition, and selection for advanced opportunities. As Alan described it, 4-H "let me be recognized in a way that wasn't really tied to my sexuality in any manner." Success and achievement in 4-H were not tied to traditional high school dynamics or milestones, and dating did not matter as much as knowledge and competence in a given project area. Since sexuality was not typically discussed in 4-H, there was an opportunity to suspend considerations of sexuality and develop other identities based on youth's unique interests. This was reflected in a memo after a community review meeting:

> *4-H provides an opportunity for identity exploration outside of queerness. The moment of coming out shifts how you are seen, and queerness becomes the monolith you are perceived as. There are so many stereotypes about what queerness is. To suspend that is to explore what it is that you as an individual enjoy doing rather than what the stereotype of what queer people are into. Sublimating your sexuality allows you to focus on other components of self and identity – figure out what you do and don't enjoy.*

Taken together, the culture of not talking about sexuality – whether through the use of euphemisms or simply not talking about any form of sexuality allowed LGBTQ youth to

sublimate their sexuality and channel their focus into developing other skill and asset-based identities.

This focus on skills and assets is rooted in the theory that gives rise to 4-H's programmatic model: Positive Youth Development (PYD). PYD seeks to engage youth in their communities to promote positive outcomes, as shown in Figure 2.

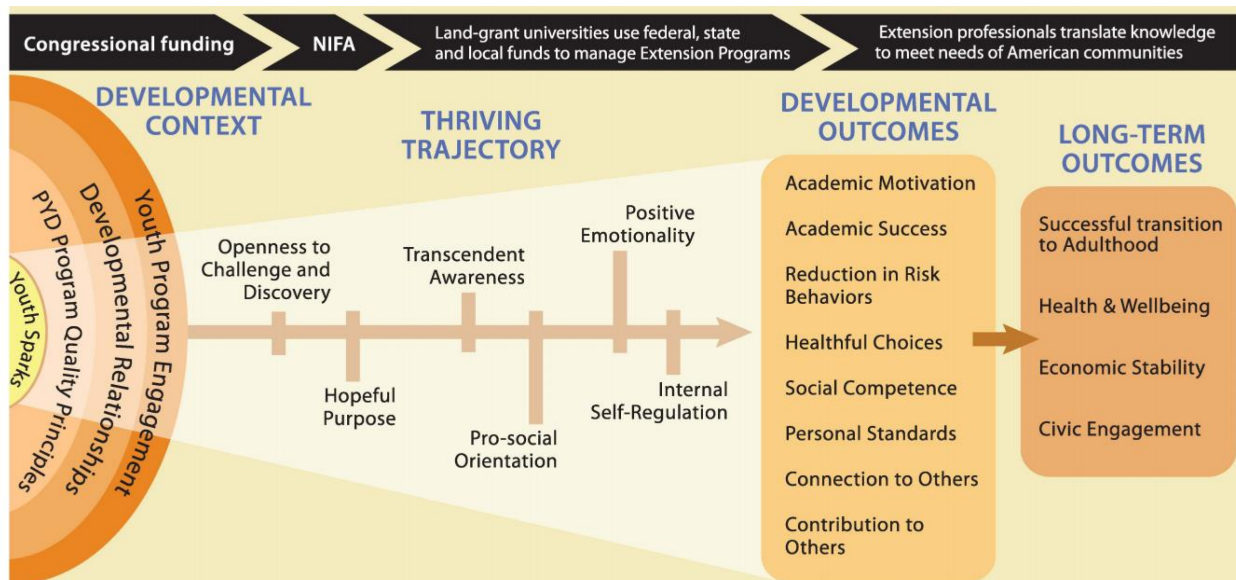

Figure 3. NIFA's 4-H as the federal model of Positive Youth Development implementation

Note. Reprinted from *NIFA: Federal Leader in Positive Youth Development,* by NIFA, 2019.

PYD is a strengths-based model that outlines what youth need to be successful in the form of the five C's: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (National 4-H Headquarters, 2011). 4-H enacts these principles through what it terms 'essential elements' in activities: positive relationship with caring adults, a safe environment, an inclusive environment, engagement in learning, opportunity for mastery, opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future, opportunity for self-determination, and the opportunity to value and

practice service for others (Martz et al., 2016; National 4-H Headquarters, 2011). These essential elements can be understood through the broader lens of four key concepts: 4-H programs promote belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Martz et al., 2016). There is emerging evidence that Positive Youth Development and the developmental assets promoted through its programming are important for preventing negative outcomes for LGBTQ youth in the same ways they are for heterosexual and cisgender youth. At the same time, LGBTQ youth have less access to those developmental assets (Toomey et al., 2018). For the LGBTQ youth in this study, 4-H's PYD model simultaneously allowed them to develop asset-based identities and sublimate their sexuality by focusing on their skills, not their sexualities.

Sublimating Sexuality Through Desexualized Environments. Under the broader strategy of 'not talking about it,' LGBTQ youth sublimated their sexuality by avoiding sexualized environments and seeking out desexualized environments, like 4-H. While people spoke of dating that occurred within the context of 4-H, it was often incidental and not a large focus of conversation or social dynamics. There was not a push to date in 4-H, and Alan spoke to the importance of 4-H as a desexualized environment:

> The nice thing for me about being in the 4-H program is that there was never any of that high school, stereotypical, push to date. And not being involved in band or sports or theater, I kinda only have to go on what I see in the media or hear from other people. But I think a lot of times when you're in those kinds of high school environments, there's sort of a, 'are you dating this person?' Or the guys sit around and do the locker room talk. or there's kind of this more highly sexually charged atmosphere. I think that's just typical with high school. And I think it's kind of even ramped up a little bit in those high school based social type activities. And I didn't find that in 4-H. We were kids that were teenagers. We were from different schools. I'm sure there was an undercurrent that I probably wasn't aware of at some point. But it just wasn't enough to register on my radar. And so as a point of that I never really felt pushed or compelled or steered in any kind of dating direction or interaction direction.

To Bryan, this desexualization of 4-H stemmed in part from parallel processes among LGBTQ educators, who adopted nonsexualized personas in the context of 4-H:

> I would say that many of the extension educators that I know that are also gay, they want to have a persona that they're not like *gay*, but definitely they aren't *straight*. It's like that they are nonsexualized. I feel like sexuality is so far removed from the scope of 4-H and FFA that people just feel it's easier just to remove themselves from that.

Alan tied this desexualized environment, in part, to the fact that 4-H was mixed gender.

> You know, boys and girls participated in 4-H programs. There was a lot of diversity. There wasn't a lot of like, quote unquote locker room talk that I ever had to deal with, which was if it was an environment with all males would make me really uncomfortable.

While in a community review meeting, a community member reasoned that it was desexualized because it brought together people from different schools and communities, as captured in the memo from that meeting:

> *There would be times when girls would be talking about boys while you were in the bunk beds at camp, but it was okay not to participate. Part of it was because everyone there was from all different schools, it wasn't just the girls on the volleyball team at the high school. So the people at camp don't know who you're talking about when you're talking about the boys you had a crush on. There's a degree of social distance that you could write it off and not participate in the conversation and you wouldn't be thought of as weird. And since they're people from other counties, you could simply make up a boyfriend if needed. No one could call you out on it and they wouldn't have known any different, because no one knew who was at your school anyway. Since they didn't know all the people at your school, the types of dating conversations that did occur were always more abstract, rather than specific gossip about shared networks of people that everyone knew. In general, in 4-H they're not asking about who you're dating. Versus at school lunch table, where you feel pressured to talking about it. You would be weird not to talk about it, and everyone knows exactly who you're talking about so you can't lie.*

4-H was a desexualized environment because there was not a sexually charged atmosphere, there was no push to date, it was mixed gender, and there was a degree of social distance between the youth in the program.

Accepting Tolerance

Throughout their sexual identity development, many LGBTQ youth in 4-H went through phases of aligning and misaligning their public and private sexual identities. For some, they

allowed their sexuality to be an open secret, where they did not expressly conceal or confirm their sexual identity and instead maintained some degree of plausible deniability about their queerness. Others were not accepting of themselves and undertook strategies to conceal their identities from themselves and others. For others, they maintained different internal and external states in terms of their sexuality, where they were accepting of themselves while no one else knew. While each strategy was unique, they together created an environment where LGBTQ youth were comfortable with 4-H being a site of tolerance, rather than explicit repression or explicit support. This can be understood by looking at the ways that LGBTQ 4-Hers were supported, not supported, and tolerated in 4-H.

Support in 4-H: Youth are Broadly Accepted and Sexuality Did Not Matter. The participants in the study largely described their experiences in 4-H as being highly supportive, joyful, high quality, "bucolic," where sexuality "was never a factor" in involvement. Bryan contrasted his experience in 4-H with that in school: "I don't feel like in 4-H [being gay] created issues. Not even close to what you experienced in your regular school life. Certainly not." In 4-H, people "didn't make a fuss" about any outward signals that might suggest a young person was queer, and people found that their sexuality did not create challenges for them. 4-H offered them a space where they were seen as assets, worthy of investing in, and celebrated for their accomplishments. As Bryan put it,

> In my 4H club as a child, I was really mentored, and I was really cherished. I was viewed as a child that had the whole world in front of them. I really felt like I was given amazing opportunities.

In 4-H, the LGBTQ youth had access to caring adults and supportive peers who were mutually invested in their success. Care in these settings was not tied to their sexuality, and youth formed lasting bonds that have, in some cases, spanned decades. These experiences are

rooted in 4-H's model of PYD, as positive relationships with caring adults and the opportunity to value and practice service for others are 'essential elements' in 4-H activities (Martz et al., 2016; National 4-H Headquarters, 2011).

This broader acceptance of them as individuals was assumed to be at least to some degree inclusive of them as queer individuals, since LGBTQ youth in the programs oftentimes expressed subtle tells about their sexuality – mannerisms, interests, or behaviors that were coded as 'queer' or 'transgressing gender' – as Alan described:

> Being in the 4H program helped me in a generalized acceptance of myself and I think, and also specific to my sexual orientation, I think. Um, and I think where that comes from is we had, you know, caring adult volunteers and educators (or 'agents' they were called in West Virginia and still are) who were interested in us as people. Or that's how I felt anyway. They weren't necessarily interested in our ability to play sports or conduct a band competition or participate in a theater or whatever else. They were interested in our being involved in 4-H and doing things. But it was very much about me and what I wanted to do. So I think the ability to be self-directed have a diversity of experiences in 4-H. I think that contributed to me having, you know, a really sense, a sense of positive development as I went through the program. And it allowed a lot of self-determination in what I was interested in. And so I think all of that directly or indirectly helped contribute to me coming to terms with my sexuality because I felt like I was being supported and evaluated or recognized or judged or whatever the perception was as a whole person, not an element of a person. And to me that meant how I acted, my mannerisms and some of those outward signs that people might look at and assume, you know, are related to sexual orientation or whatever. So I just felt supported as a person and because being gay was part of who I was as a person, I felt supported in that as well.

Even when there were subtle hints of queerness, adults did not treat LGBTQ youth differently, and they were able to succeed and be recognized for their other talents and interests. While youth were broadly celebrated and supported, none of the participants ever felt like they received explicit acknowledgement or support as queer people – either formally or informally.

Non-Support in 4-H. Throughout their 4-H experience, many participants identified subtle messages of non-support in 4-H. For some, it was in interactions with peers who would "look at you funny" for having queer-coded mannerisms, or make fun of you for the types of

animals you showed that were perceived as less utilitarian and, by extension, less masculine. People described hearing homophobic comments or having homophobic slurs directed at them by peers, and, as Lee described, there were not mechanisms in place to stop them:

> Our system at the time was definitely not equipped to stop bias and homophobic comments. Right. We didn't know how to, we didn't know how to do that. The people in charge, the people with power, the people in positions, they weren't knowledgeable enough to be able to say like, this is a problem. Yeah. So absolutely that language was rampant.

For others, moments where politics and religion came up in 4-H made them think that they would not be accepted as LGBTQ people. These frequently came up in moments where 4-Hers were interacting with the broader agricultural community, such as at fairs, livestock shows, or producer banquets. Crystal described why she remained closeted in 4-H even after she began coming out in other areas of her life:

> I didn't really feel super comfortable being out in 4-H for the time that I did have as a queer youth in 4-H. Especially within the context of fairs. Cause it's not just 4-H members there. It's also like agricultural leaders in the community. And so that to me felt much more intimidating cause my 4H club... They aren't political at all. So it's hard to tell what their individual views are. But like agricultural leaders within the community, they're very obviously conservative. So I didn't feel super comfortable like as a queer youth in that atmosphere. […] They're the most present on auction day cause they're coming there to support the youth. […] Like, if the local pig farmers sold some pigs to you for showing at the fair, they'll usually be there throughout the fair to support them. You can know that they're conservative just because at the auction where they have a platform, they'll talk about like guns or the NRA. It's weird. I don't know why it gets mentioned. [… Then] sometimes in the little auction speech that [4-H kids] give when they're up, they'll like advertise that they're a member of the NRA, and they'll clap for that. It's kind of crazy. So you definitely know that a lot of them are conservative, or at least like the outspoken ones.

In Crystal's experience, and the experiences of others, 4-H clubs themselves were largely apolitical and not religious. Yet in these adjacent spaces, success – getting high prices at auction, winning premiums at shows, and awards at producer banquets – was tied in some part to religion and conservative politics.

The subtly non-supportive environment of 4-H was communicated in policies that reflected the idea that "in 4-H, straight was the only option." Many spoke to experiences in sex-segregated facilities, such as camps and overnight trips, where the policies of those places were designed around the assumption that all the youth were straight, and 'boys' should be kept separate from 'girls.' When LGBTQ youth entered these spaces, the policies were shifted to protect their straight peers, as Lee described in his experiences of overnight 4-H trips:

> [The prior state leader of 4-H] viewed queer children as a risk to be managed, not a young person to be developed. So what I mean by that is in the conversations [around] queer kids actively participating within the program, it was "how do you manage the risk of public fall out?" "How do you manage the risk of rooming?" "How do you manage the risk of like accusation?" It was never a conversation about "how do we develop these young people into well rounded adults." It was always a conversation about "how do we manage the risks that are associated with these young people." And that is always going to create policies that actively discriminate against young people. Because we're not trying to do good by them. We're trying to protect everyone else from them. That's the mentality. […] So as a young person, some of that discrimination was like in rooming. Right? You know, somehow there's an odd [number of people], somehow you magically ended up in a room by yourself. I'm a little bit like I need my personal space. So I wasn't always mad about it. But it was very clear as to why it was happening. Right? Like we know why that this person [is in a room] by themselves because, you know, they might do something to somebody. We know why they're not allowed to go on this trip. We know why. It's never like explicit. But ain't nobody that stupid to not be able to look at it and go, *okay* [it's clear what is happening here]. Right?

LGBTQ youth were attuned to these subtle messages that 4-H did not have policies that were designed for their benefit. Crystal, who was a 4-Her at the time when a political controversy around LGBTQ youth in 4-H gained traction in the media (e.g., Kaiser, 2023; Clayworth & Crowder, 2018; Lusher Shute, 2019; Olmstead, 2018), speaks to this:

> Crystal: … I never really saw like any open hate against it [LGBTQ people] within my club. But never really like any open inclusion either.
>
> Kait: Mmm. Okay. That makes sense. You said within my club, was there stuff outside of your club?
>
> Crystal: I mean just looking at National 4-H within the past few years. I think it was last year where they added that they were inclusive of LGBT+ youth and then I think they

> retracted it after backlash. But I'm not 100% sure, but just like seeing that kind of like signals [a lack of inclusion] to the greater 4-H community I think.

These subtle and overt signs of non-support led some LGBTQ youth to conclude that while 4-H was a place that they thrived, it was not explicitly equipped to acknowledge or support them as LGBTQ people, while certain policies, ties to religion, and nods to politics that made it unwelcoming for LGBTQ youth.

These findings are echoed in studies of 4-H educators and leaders, which suggest that adults in 4-H were unprepared to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth, especially in rural areas. State 4-H Leaders demonstrated lower levels of knowledge about LGBTQ identities and issues compared to other educators, with varying levels of homophobia and best practice implementation (Soder, 2009). While many educators and volunteers reported feeling comfortable working with LGBTQ youth, participants generally overestimated knowledge of the community while scoring low in basic knowledge of LGBTQ terminology (Swires, 2018). This lack of knowledge contributed, in part, to a culture where sexuality was not discussed in public, and conversations about diversity did not include sexual minorities. Many 4-H leaders are volunteers with little formal training, especially in terms of working with queer youth, which may contribute to their lack of knowledge (Swires, 2018). Educators expressed the belief that "ag kids aren't gay" (Swires, 2018, p. 29), and that even if they were, 4-H was not "the right program to help LGBTQ youth come to grips with their own sexuality" (p. 31). Educators expressed different levels of acceptance for LGBTQ youth based on the rurality of the program, religious and political beliefs of members and volunteers, and race of the youth, with White LGBTQ 4-Hers being generally more accepted than youth of color of any sexuality (Poliseno, 2019). While 4-H educators spoke of the importance of sense of belonging for youth and had some level of familiarity with the LGBTQ acronym, participants lacked familiarity with LGBTQ terminology,

skills to communicate with LGBTQ youth, and spoke of a dearth of programmatic policies and practical guidelines to meet LGBTQ youth needs (Poliseno, 2019).

Tolerance in 4-H. What emerged from this collective environment of support and non-support was a feeling that LGBTQ people were tolerated in 4-H, or accepted up to the point of being acknowledged as LGBTQ. This frequently cut across stories of receiving support and the culture of not talking about sexuality, like Jasper named:

> I always felt like [4-H] was a place where I could just be me. I mean, I wasn't fully, I wasn't out. I didn't talk about that side of myself. Um, but I didn't feel like bullied or discriminated against or any of those things. I could just be who I was and sort of. Without, without the like label, even though probably most people knew. It was not, it just wasn't something that like we talked about at that point.

This broader idea – that you could be supported and be yourself, so long as that piece of you remained unnamed – made 4-H a place where youth were celebrated, and their sexualities were tolerated so long it was sublimated. Crystal recognized this risk, and chose not to come out in 4-H based on her assessment of risking the community that meant so much to her:

> I was scared that this space that I had like grown up with, and loved and do love, would suddenly not support me anymore. And I didn't really want to risk that.

Lee described questioning if he would have been supported in the same ways by people in 4-H if he had not been managing the public perception of his sexual identity:

> Now, can I name off individuals who supported me in the programs that I did, or supported me just in development in general? Yeah. But your sexuality is such a huge part of your development […] They totally supported me, right up to *'this'* line. […] Did they support me? Absolutely. Yeah. Right up until the point of having or having a conversation or recognizing my sexuality. And that's where that's important. […] I'm not sure even as an adult, I'm not sure how you determine how supportive someone was. Right? And I think that's something that a lot of people who are in the queer community struggle with. Like you have people you care about that you love dearly, who were very important to in certain ways. Who, when you really think about it, where are they *actually* supportive of you? Like, like today […] I'm very out and proud gay man. Right? Like we're not kidding ourselves here. Would those same people, same people who were in quotation marks, "Supportive", would those same people be supportive of the of the

> person I am now? I don't know. I don't know if those same 4-H leaders would still be supportive of this person, who, if I was 16, had *this* [openly gay] personality. God help everybody if I had this personality. But I don't think they would. I don't think if you'd taken me now and transposed me back into a 16-year-old person […] in 2006ish, somethin' like that, would the same group of adults that were supportive then have been supportive of me? I can't really say they would have. Right? Like that's really probably not a thing. So I don't know. I don't know how to answer the question of like informal support because was I supported? Absolutely. Was I supported as an *odd* kid instead of a *queer* kid? Yes. See what I'm saying? There's a difference.

In 4-H, LGBTQ youth described the culture of 4-H towards their full selves as broadly neutral: "not negative messages, not positive messages" or "not open hate, not open acceptance," or "supports but doesn't approve." The result was that 4-H was an environment that was not affirming of their whole selves.

Accepting Tolerance. Despite these complex layers of experience for LGBTQ youth in 4-H, most seemed to broadly accept tolerance and did not expect to be recognized as LGBTQ people at that time in their lives. They talked about "not internalizing" the mixed messages, or not thinking deeply about the meaning of them. Kevin spoke to this:

> So Carolyn, my 4-H coach when I was in high school. She's... How to put it. She's very conservatively Christian. She's a very nice lady. She does not approve. But she does support, if that makes any sense. So she was one of those people that is very much the, 'look, I don't approve of what you're doing. I don't approve of the lifestyle, of the idea, of whatever. But I love you and I support you even if I don't support what you're doing.' So did I receive mixed messages? Yes, definitely. Cause it's pretty hard to reconcile with the people that are like, I don't love what you're doing, but I love you as a person. […] It's kind of hard to understand when people say, 'Well I don't support that, but I support you.' And it's like, 'Yeah? Well, I mean, I'm kind of married to a guy, so isn't that kind of the same thing? And so a bit of cognitive dissonance there.

Like Kevin, others in the study seemed to expect that some degree of harassment or bias or lack of support was to be expected. When talking about discrimination of queer kids and adults in 4-H Lee wrote it off, "cause that's the reality of breathing" when you are a queer person. As James put it:

> I found that [4-H was] very affirming of my assets. And I was able to grow a whole lot. It wasn't affirming of my whole self. But it was like, "Hey, we're going to take you for your skillset that you have. And we appreciate you for that." And I was like, "okay, I can run with this."

Many participants seemed to have set aside the expectation that they would be fully accepted as LGBTQ people in 4-H and were grateful to be in a space that supported them in other ways. For LGBTQ youth who were hyper aware of how they were being perceived and sublimating their sexuality, it never an expectation that they would be acknowledged or affirmed as LGBTQ people.

Queer Thriving in 4-H

In this complex environment of support and constraint, LGBTQ youth found ways to thrive in 4-H. Queer survival and thrival are complexly intertwined: "To engage queer thrival is to ask that we investigate, uncover, and invent ways of thriving upon and amid our surviving. However, it does not replace the continued need to address and advocate for survival. Rather, queer thrival looks to help guide queers into a twenty-first century in ways that do justice to our existence utilizing our survival to cultivate our queer thrival." (Greteman, 2016, p. 310). In many cases these strategies to survive – sublimating sexuality, developing asset-based identities, being in desexualized mixed gender environments, not talking about sexuality – created pathways to thriving.

Securing internal and external affirmation

For all the queer youth in the study, 4-H was a space where they were able to access internal and external validation and affirmation. Their experiences in 4-H allowed them to develop identities outside their sexuality that affirmed that they were knowledgeable, competent,

and skilled in project areas that mattered to them. To them, their projects were “where I focused and excelled,” “my area to achieve in,” “my specialties” or “it was just kind of my thing.” They were in a community of people where there was “really an appreciation for skills and abilities in whatever area that was” and a place where “especially peers respect knowledge and capability.” They developed identities as “the 4-H kid” where they were perceived as “put together” and capable. The ability to be self-directed in 4-H and be autonomous in choosing projects facilitated this sense that that expertise was “something that was totally yours.” People could be “more fully themselves” and express their own unique interests – there were “other weird kids” who shared their passions. Young people “felt good putting in the work” and seeing the results of their efforts.

Outside of an internal sense of validation, youth had access to external validation through 4-H. Youth experiences in 4-H connected to the values and traditions in their families, and participating in 4-H allowed young people to gain approval from their parents, as Alan described:

> I was an achievement-oriented person. I like to win. I like to be recognized. I was not athletic or good at sports. I was not musical in any capacity. I was not comfortable with the theater stage and the kind of presentation style that that entailed. But I could do 4-H projects and win and have support of my family. And so for me, I think I really transitioned [into taking on more leadership roles in 4-H] because it allowed me to have that, uh, affiliation but also that achievement and that recognition.

Outside of parental approval, 4-H was a space where youth had access to caring adults who took a vested interest in their success and development, which was an important part of James’s sense of self:

> I had lots of very caring adults that were committed to me. My club leaders, all the parents, you know, that it was a very affirming, welcoming, warm environment.

LGBTQ youth generally lack access to formal and informal mentorship, and the mentorship embedded in PYD programs like 4-H can bridge that gap (Mallory et al., 2014), like it did for James. Many of the young people were able to see the products of their hard work through awards, trophies, ribbons, as well as being selected or nominated by peers for leadership opportunities. For young LGBTQ people who were hyper-aware of how they were being perceived, 4-H was a place where they were affirmed as competent experts who could succeed in areas that were important to them. And while this recognition was not explicitly tied to sexuality, some of the gay men in the study believed their success was tied, at least in some part, to his sexual identity:

> A lot of LGBTQ kids seem to gravitate toward 4-H or go on to achieve or excel in 4-H programs and maybe get to higher levels of achievement and therefore more likely to be seen or recognized by the adults that are in the program.
>
> Bryan echoed this point, and tied it to the gendered dynamics of 4-H:
>
> I feel like being a gay adolescent and being a gay adult actually helps you in some of these regards. If you look at leadership positions in ag education, whether that's in academia, whether that's in 4-H even 4-H state officers or FFA state officers, it’s all dominated by women. So dominated by girls that I feel like oftentimes the boys that are gay or bisexual or, or queer in some way […] I think that boys find themselves being favorited by ag teachers or educators. Because oftentimes those roles are filled by females and they [gay boys] are more relatable to them. I always felt that I had such a bond with my female extension educator because we were just on the same page. Um, and even I remember interviewing for graduate school and I remember thinking to myself, well, you know, I don't really like these old men, but I remember I really liked, um, Dr. Jones who was, um, the associate Dean at the time and I met her at Penn State and I was like, I really clicked with her and she gave me an assistantship, gave me an extra job, got me through graduate school. I feel like sometimes being gay in these situations, especially in 4-H and FFA circles really does help you relate to the females that are in power. I'm not sure if that sounds totally crazy, but that's really been my experience.

In avoiding sexualized environments, gay men like Alan “felt more comfortable relating to girls” and intentionally sought to make connections with women and girls rather than boys, who they might have crushes on or there might be rumors about if they were close to them. Beyond

individual motivations to connect with women to avoid connecting with men, Bryan tied his success to stereotypes about gay men that supported his success in 4-H:

> I served in every single role there was as an officer in 4-H. So I was the game leader all the way up to the teen council president. I would say that I would say that in my opinion, because I was gay, I was perceived as being more organized. And because I was gay, I was perceived as being maybe a little more delicate and more able to communicate with people in a democratic way or something? I feel like because I was gay, I was viewed as someone that could complete tasks.

4-H was a space where youth could gain internal and external affirmation for their competence from caring adults and leaders, where gendered relationships might have set gay boys in particular up for success.

Financial independence and pathways to one's future

Uniquely built into the structure of 4-H are opportunities for financial security, through making money as young people and scholarships for college. For LGBTQ youth, current and future financial stability were particularly important. Making money as children was valued in their families, and a normalized part of rural culture in many places. But for LGBTQ youth, it was particularly important to have funding streams that were independent of their parents, as Lee described:

> I started living part time at my parents whenever I was 16 and that [coming out to my family] was the driving force behind that. My mother and me were very close. I was unable to have any sort of relationship with my father because, well, for lots of reasons, but part of it was definitely because of my sexuality. And so I didn't actually live there. Which again goes back to the business concept. Right? Like, we have to provide food at this point. That's how I've chosen my 4-H projects.

For Lee, his 4-H projects were a way to pay for food during a time of housing insecurity related to his sexual identity. For others, including Alan, their projects helped fund college:

> Another big factor as I got older was, you know, you got premiums for ribbons or other awards, you got money from the sale of your livestock and that contributed to a college fund. So there was sort of a tangible financial benefit that went with it.

Many were able to pay for some part of their college educations through scholarships and profits earned from selling products through 4-H.

Outside of the financial support, 4-H was an important vehicle for developing a pipeline for LGBTQ youth to attend university. They engaged in skill building programs that emphasized soft skill development and life skills that were important components in college applications and even obtaining jobs and opportunities within and beyond college. They were able to form connections with professors and programs at Land Grant Universities through college visit days and explore their developing career interests. 4-H was a vehicle to explore the path and secure the material conditions needed to go to college and, in many cases, explore their sexual identities in new settings.

Creating safe and affirming social networks

4-H's structure as an out of school, county-based program with many opportunities for involvement under the same organizational umbrella supported LGBTQ youth as they sought to create safe and affirming social networks. Within 4-H, youth could pick up a diversity of projects and roles that supported their development, which was broadly affirming, as Alan described:

> They [my parents] were interested in our being involved in 4-H and doing things. But it was very much about me and what I wanted to do. I think the ability to be self-directed and have a diversity of experiences in 4-H contributed to me having a sense of positive development as I went through the program. And it allowed a lot of self-determination in what I was interested in.

To Bryan, 4-H allowed for the creation of new relationships that did not exist in other spaces:

> I had friends that were in my 4-H club that I went to school with and I didn't talk to them. Um, when I went to 4-H then I, "Oh, Hey Missy, how's your steer doing?" And we can be

> friends here. But in school it was just a different, um, a different group of people. In school I felt like I had to live up to people's expectations of what group you fell into. And when I was in 4-H I really just felt like I could do what I was interested in. I think that that is a big contrast between the two. And I'm sure people have very different experiences. Um, but I would say that I felt like I could be more myself and again, I think it was because my 4-H program, I mean we had children involved that had major learning disabilities, physical, mental disabilities, social disorders. And you know, what? If people were different, you still go ahead and you say the pledge, you do your activity and you accept each other because you were all there to do the same thing. And I don't feel like that was the same in high school or middle school.

James described the importance of connecting on a shared interest in an environment that values competence and ability:

> There is really an appreciation for skills and abilities in whatever that area is. So it changes the social dynamic. Right? It's not the same high school social structure. Cause I in fact went to 4-H with people I wasn't in school with. But the social dynamics there was very different from the social dynamics in school. Right? Cause there was respect to be like, "Hey, you do those things when you do it well and I'm interested in that" And is more pure asset based.

Because of 4-H's relationship with other organizations, this expanded further as 4-H served as a bridge to other community groups. Crystal and Bryan spoke to being introduced to local community service organizations through 4-H, then getting involved with the organizations later as individuals and expanding their social networks that way. 4-H's structure was specifically important for LGBTQ youth when they encountered issues with peers, as Alan spoke to:

> … and it was diverse enough and divergent enough that when there were kids that I wouldn't necessarily want to become friendly with or friends with, we didn't necessarily have to move in the same circles. We could still be in 4-H and do really different things.

For others, 4-H further helped shield LGBTQ youth from negative social settings by providing excused absences from school – allowing youth to avoid harassment they were experiencing in their classrooms.

Taken together, 4-H allowed LGBTQ youth to access new and different peer networks to meet new groups of people that have different social dynamics from their schools. It created new

possibilities for relationships and connections based on a shared interest rather than social group expectations. Finally, 4-H's structure allowed enough social room that LGBTQ youth could create affirming asset-based networks that were independent of those they did not get along with.

Envisioning queer futures

Access to new and different peer networks through the structure of 4-H also allowed LGBTQ youth to begin to envision queer futures for themselves. This was especially salient for LGBTQ youth who took advantage of state, regional, and national leadership opportunities that involved travelling and meeting youth from other areas. In their home communities, many LGBTQ youth lacked role models of queer adults and peers who were successful and shared their passions. But travelling and moving higher in the levels of 4-H brought in examples of queer adults and peers that were critical for developing a vision of a queer future, as Lee described:

> This 4-H specialist at the time, who was the person in charge of teen programming. [He] was a gay man and was very respected and accepted within his position. And that set a precedent that this was something that you could, you could exist, right? Like you could be a person. Because you could see somebody who didn't just exist but did so and was employed and had a respected position and was, you know, all the things. Now mind you, he is a cisgendered [sic] white male gay man. Like there's a lot of benefit. Like there's a lot of like protections against being queer whenever you're all these other things. Um, but that's a very different theoretical conversation. It doesn't matter if you're a 10-year-old child for that, for as a young person, you see what looks like you, right? Or what you'd like to. And so like there's a queer person who is okay with it. Okay with it!

To Jasper, these moments were critical in accepting his identity as a gay man. He reflected on his first time befriending other LGBTQ people and said: "I finally had a vision of what it could be like to be a gay person in the world, which I never had, I'd never had before that. So I think that that was a huge part of it [accepting myself as a gay person]." In many remote

communities, youth were desperate to find any positive representation of LGBTQ people and societies. 4-H provided a venue to find role models and peers that affirmed that it was possible to be gay and be successful. LGBTQ youth went about building these visions of a possible queer future through "seeing fam" and gossip.

Seeing Fam. While LGBTQ youth were getting more involved in 4-H, travelling through 4-H, and building affirmative peer networks they were able to 'clock' other queer youth and educators to build an implicit queer community, even while not having explicit conversations about sexuality, as Lee described:

> Lee: …And then also being able to see other young people. Right? Like we know when we see fam, right? Like *family*. This, *this* is family, there's a difference. We can point each other out. It's a thing.
>
> Kait: Can you talk to me about what your relationships were like with your, like the peers that you had, the other out kids?
>
> Lee: Um, at the time, an acknowledgement of existence, right? Did we have in depth conversations about the cute boys? No. We just weren't ready to have those conversations. We weren't in a culture wider than 4-H that allowed us to be comfortable enough with those conversations 'cause we never had them with anybody. Right? We didn't know how to have those conversations. 'Cause we never seen or engaged in them before outside of our like crazy heads. But you know, conversations are practiced, right? Like we practice conversations. We run over them in our head before we have them. You know, every conversation is basically an interview. Like to a certain extent, most conversations are not truly just working in it, get in the way. And so there was no script for any of us to know what to say. We didn't have those conversations, but we knew that we existed. And we oftentimes would connect with each other. Or be around each other or opt to hang out with each other. But that was not a conversation we knew had to have with each other.

Many spoke of having these moments throughout their lives where queer and trans children would gravitate towards each other, motivated by an implicit or unspoken understanding rather than a shared conversation around sexual identity. Lee expanded on this idea and how it was specifically facilitated by travel and the culture of tolerance, where 'odd people' were allowed to exist:

> If you're only one of four or five out young people in your county or a lot of rural counties, it's like, there's six of us, right? […] we're the odd ones, right? So if there's only a few of you and you're involved in an organization where you can go other places, right? Like I can travel, I can have interactions with other teens. Who are also, different and queer and odd, right? Because you're in an environment that allows you to present yourself as such. It creates a lot of comfort and safe space.

The culture and structure of 4-H allowed LGBTQ to 'see fam' and build a vision of what it meant to be a queer person in the world when they lacked it in their home communities.

Gossip. When other LGBTQ people were not physically present in the same spaces or communities, gossip allowed LGBTQ youth to affirm their identities and build upon this implicit queer network. Participants consistently revealed gossip in the form of both hidden knowledge and open secrets, like Bryan's account of his and others' relationships in 4-H:

> Bryan: … I know of several long-term relationships, both straight and gay. That started in 4-H.
>
> Kait: no way.
>
> Bryan: Oh yeah. Illinois 4-H they're all bunch of closet cases. I swear 20% of all male 4-Hers in Illinois are gay and they all are in love with each other.
>
> Kait: What's your experience with Illinois? Like where, where are you getting this from?
>
> Bryan: Well, one of my, um, I don't wanna say boyfriend, one of my deeper connections I've had throughout my adult life was an Illinois 4-H and FFA state officer and […] it's, it's in FFA as well. My experience in working with FFA is that a huge percentage of youth that find themselves in leadership positions that are male are gay, 100%. And I know, I know when I was working with the Kansas 4-H and FFA state officers that at least half of the males were gay. A huge amount. […] It's such a common thing that everybody knew about it. It was just like an unsung song, you know?

Participants would frequently tell stories about other queer people they knew or had heard of in 4-H. This expansive (and frequently implicit) community also allowed space for queer youth to explore their romantic attractions from a distance. Bryan talked about developing "very heavy crushes on just some of my co-4Hers. And young leaders or extension educators. Definitely. Camp counselors for sure." As Lee put it, gossip and crushes could live safely in their "crazy

little heads" and allow youth to explore an internal queer world in a safe setting before moving into physical queer spaces.

Queer Survival and Thrival in 4-H

LGBTQ youth experience the organizational environment of 4-H differently than their straight and cisgender peers. Because of the pressures of cultures of place, family, community, and rurality, LGBTQ youth engage in context-adaptive strategies: they maintain hyperawareness of others' perceptions, sublimate their sexuality, accept tolerance, develop skill/asset-based identities, find safe ways to express themselves, secure internal and external affirmation, secure material conditions and pathways to their future, create safe and affirming social networks, and envision queer futures (Figure 3). These strategies collectively represent queer ways of surviving and pathways towards thriving, and are explicitly and implicitly supported by the structure, values, cultures, and norms of 4-H (Figure 4).

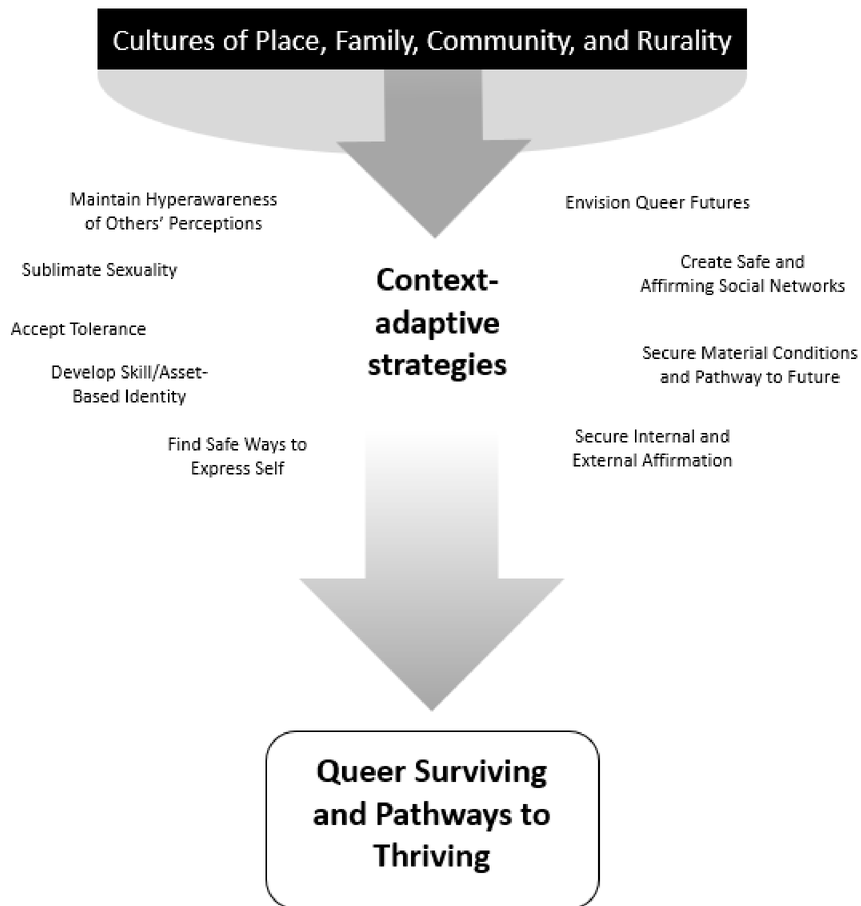

Figure 4. Cultures of Place, Family, Community and Rurality give rise to unique cultures around queerness in generalized youth development programs, resulting in context-adaptive strategies that represent queer ways of surviving and pathways to thriving.

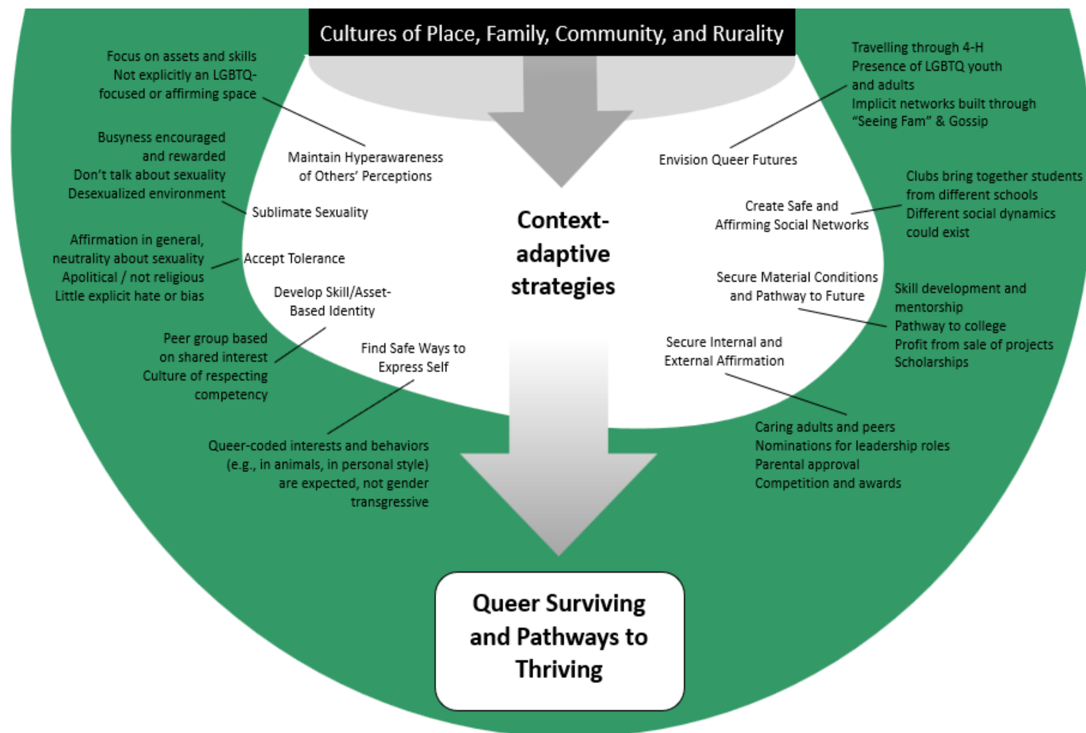

Figure 5. Context-adaptive strategies are implicitly and explicitly supported through the structure of 4-H.

For the LGBTQ people in this study, 4-H was a structure that allowed them to survive and thrive in the face of hostile school and community climates.

Conclusion

Murray et al. (In Press) explored how tensions between sexuality and organizational access, participation, and identity management emerged from the dynamic factors that simultaneously encouraged and constrained opportunities for youth involvement in 4-H. Youth's cultures of place, family, community, and rurality give rise to unique cultures around queerness within generalized youth development organizations. The current study explores these unique

cultures around queerness. Within the context of 4-H, LGBTQ youth engaged in unique context-adaptive strategies that were implicitly and explicitly supported by the structure of 4-H. These strategies allowed them to survive and create pathways towards thriving. While 4-H provided a unique infrastructure to make this possible, these processes are not unique to 4-H, as Gretman (2016) explained:

> To engage queer thrival is to ask that we investigate, uncover, and invent ways of thriving upon and amid our surviving. However, it does not replace the continued need to address and advocate for survival. Rather, queer thrival looks to help guide queers into a twenty-first century in ways that do justice to our existence utilizing our survival to cultivate our queer thrival (p. 310)

For the LGBTQ youth of this study, 4-H was a space for surviving while enacting and cultivating queer thrival. These processes collectively embody a form of queer resilience:

> the skills and abilities that are learned and developed because of adversarial experiences or stressors due to prejudice, discrimination, and violence rooted in homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. These skills and abilities are historically and contextually dependent, as well as intimately connected to related forms of prejudice, discrimination, and violence based on other forms of difference. (Greteman, 2021)

This study makes visible the innovative forms of community, support, and expression that LGBTQ youth create for themselves in response to their experiences of oppression and marginalization. Rural LGBTQ youth enact unique forms of resilience that make their lives possible and joyful.

The results of this study can be applied to make 4-H a more affirming place for LGBTQ youth and can be leveraged to enact broader systemic changes that address the root issues these youth face. 4-H already has an asset-based model that can promote the developmental assets that LGBTQ youth need, especially in the absence of targeted support programs (Fish, 2020). This

model can be more welcoming to LGBTQ youth with minimal adaptations. In one strand of adjustments to practice, LGBTQ can be encouraged to explore opportunities for surviving, such as picking up different projects, developing non-familial income streams, and developing asset-based identities. Changes can be made to increase access to the programmatic elements that LGBTQ youth have utilized to enact resilience, such as travelling through 4-H, exposure to college and career pathways, securing scholarships and obtaining recognition through awards – access to which are mediated by youths' other intersecting identities, such as race (Martin & Hartmann, 2020; Poliseno, 2019), class, and rurality (Elliott & Lambert, 2018). 4-H would benefit from identifying policies and procedures – particularly around rooming and the use of sex-segregated facilities – that "view queer children as a risk to be managed," and shift towards enacting policies that are focused on "developing these young people into well rounded adults."

At the same time, 4-H can create more clear mechanisms for reporting and responding to instances of bias and harassment within the program. While the LGBTQ youth in the study broadly accepted it as a site of tolerance, explicit messaging – from the broader organization, from educators, in curricula, and in practice – that LGBTQ youth are viewed not just as cherished youth, but *seen* as cherished *queer and trans youth,* would disrupt the culture of silence around sexuality in the program. The current null approach, where 4-H does not explicitly acknowledge the diverse sexual and gender identities of youth is "devoid of equity messages, thus inherently discriminatory because the 'normal' is designed in terms of European American, male, Christian, heterosexual, physically abled privilege" (Archibeque-Engle, 2015, p. 13).

Finally, 4-H has the opportunity to leverage its position as preeminent institution in rural communities to advocate for systemic change that addresses the root needs that push youth

towards needing to be so resilient: lack of LGBTQ-specific affirming spaces and resources, hostile school and community climates, low tolerance for difference, lack of role models, and experiences of bias, disapproval and violence. For LGBTQ youth in rural areas, resilience should not be the goal; young people should be able to grow and thrive in communities that value and see them for who they are. This does not change by arming youth to be more resilient in the face of oppression, but rather through the dismantling the systems that marginalize them and attempt to "ban as much of them as possible."

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Chapter 5. Conclusion

Despite the clear practitioner demand, documented transdisciplinary interest, and established precedent, there has been a lack of published, peer reviewed research on sexual orientation in youth agricultural education and positive youth development programs. This dissertation seeks to address that need by assembling three studies that collectively engage questions of queer resilience, survival, and thrival in agricultural education and positive youth development programs.

In Chapter 2, Queering Agricultural Education Research: Challenges and Strategies for Advancing Inclusion, I leverage queer theory to identify and analyze a nascent canon of literature on sexuality in agricultural education. The chapter first reviews LGBTQ agricultural education texts, including published and unpublished projects, theses/dissertations, commentaries, literature reviews, and journal articles. These texts vary in context, and include school-based agricultural education, FFA, extension education broadly, and 4-H. These 11 texts are then considered as a body of literature, and analyzed with Queer Theory to reveal how authors navigate the landscape of agricultural education in a way that allows them to address questions of sexuality in the face of oppression and marginalization in the field. There are persistent challenges to the inclusion of these topics: many are unpublished manuscripts, there are low levels of cross-citation between papers, disciplinary silos and the selective uptake of work limit analysis. At the same time, authors undertake queer methods of situating their work in the discipline, engage in queer citational practices, and queer rhetorical strategies to advance inclusion. There are complex tensions about the representation of LGBTQ people in these texts. Texts generally omit LGBTQ youth, omit LGBTQ adults, and focus on the experiences of straight educators. The studies overrepresent white participants, as well as other key

demographics. To advance inclusion, authors engage in scavenging methodologies (Murphy and Lugg, 2016), and strategically employ visibility and invisibility to protect participants. The literature is plagued by the use of deficit models, which may be utilized because of their alignment with transdisciplinary trends and narratives. An analysis of these strategies employed by authors lays bare the challenges and opportunities for advancing inclusion of LGBTQ people and topics in agricultural education and creates a foundational literature from which the later studies in this dissertation draw from.

In Chapter 3, An Emerging Conceptual Model of LGBTQ Youth Organizational Access in 4-H, I develop a proposed conceptual model of the affordances and constraints LGBTQ youth encounter in accessing 4-H. Retrospective semi-structured interviews were conducted with LGBTQ 4-H alumni, and data were analyzed utilizing Grounded Theory. For the participants in this study, the cultures of the place influenced the kinds of activities in which they participated as youth. 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 youths 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 proposed conceptual model of LGBTQ youth organizational access.

In Chapter 4, Context-Adaptive Strategies of LGBTQ Youth in a Positive Youth Development Program: 4-H as a Site of Queer Survival and Thrival, I looked beyond access to seek to understand how LGBTQ youth experience 4-H, and the ways in which LGBTQ youth survive and build pathways to thriving as enacted in 4-H. This study drew upon the same semi-structured interviews as Chapter 3, and data were analyzed using Grounded Theory. What I found is that LGBTQ youth navigated these complex environments by engaging in strategies that allowed them to survive and put them on pathways towards thriving in the context of 4-H. Youth sublimated their sexuality in 4-H through busyness, not talking about it, and seeking out desexualized environments. They accepted tolerance in 4-H because they were broadly supported outside their sexuality, received subtle messages of non-support, and lacked the expectation that they would be acknowledged as LGBTQ people in 4-H. The LGBTQ participants in the study also found ways to thrive in 4-H. Through 4-H, youth were able to secure internal and external affirmation from adults and peers. They worked to amass the material means to build a more secure life through financial independence and developing a pathway to their future. They were able to envision queer futures by building implicit networks through seeing 'fam' and gossip.

Taken together, these three studies offer a crucial starting point to better understanding the unique experiences of LGBTQ people in agricultural education and positive youth development programs. Through engaging in questions of queer survival and thrival, this dissertation explores context-adaptive resilience strategies that LGBTQ people employ while navigating systems and institutions that ultimately were not made for them. That is not to say that the studies of this dissertation argue for a more resilience subject, but rather seek to identify

how systems of oppression function within institutions, how that relates to resilience, and how we can transform these systems so young people don’t have to be so resilient just to survive.

To queer thrival.