OPPORTUNITY ROLE STRUCTURE, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND LEADERSHIP: PROCESSES OF FOSTER YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD PARTICIPATION

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Youth aging out of foster care constitute a vulnerable and understudied population. In spite of evidence that suggests civic participation may be an empowering, developmental process for youth in the general population, few community psychology studies have investigated civic participation among youth aging out of state systems. This qualitative study used in-depth interviewing with foster Youth Advisory Board leaders as the primary means to explore this intersection. Triangulated data collection also included (a) descriptive survey research with youth leaders, (b) in-depth interviewing and descriptive research with civic youth workers/adult coordinators, and (c) nonparticipant observation of Youth Advisory Board meetings. Directed content analysis revealed 3 emergent themes (civic literacy, Youth Advisory Board as family, and privileged positions) related to foster youth civic participation. These themes are assumed to support and extend processes allied with intraorganizational empowerment (opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership). Implications for policy, practice, and future research are discussed. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

Youth aging out of foster care constitute an underrepresented population in society, with unique developmental needs (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Munson & McMillen, 2009). They have been described as a marginalized and disempowered group (Paul-Ward, 2009),

stated to lack relational and ecological permanence (Sanchez, 2004). To the extent that the empowerment processes may cultivate *more* control over one's life (Rappaport, 1981), empowering processes—facilitated by empowering organizations—may be useful to moderate the potentially negative effects of socioenvironmental risk on health and mental health outcomes for youth living in, or aging out of, state care.

Background

In 2013, approximately 402,378 young people were living in foster care nationwide (United States Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2014). Although the majority of them (53%) had permanency goals of "reunification," 5% had permanency goals of emancipation from their respective state child welfare system (AKA "aging out"). The USDHHS (2014) reports that, nationally, 238,280 youth exited state care in the same year: 51% of those exiting (121,334 youth) were reunited with parents or primary caretakers and 10% (23,090) aged out (USDHHS, 2014). Although these data represent a cross section of distinct groups (children in care vs. children exiting care), it is worth noting that a five percentage point disparity exits between aging out as permanency goal and aging out as reality.

Youth aging out of care may transition to independent adulthood with mere perfunctory safety nets (Bellamy, 2008; Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Shirk & Stangler, 2004; Simmel, Shpiegel, & Murshid, 2012), despite a sustained need for support (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Many youth in their final years of care have low rates of academic achievement and a high risk of adversity (Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007). Similarly, youth emancipated from care have generally spent more years in the system, and consequently may have encountered more placement disruptions than youth who are ultimately reunited with parents (Leathers, 2006).

Placement disruptions refer to the physical moving of foster youth from home to home, school to school, and community to community. Because placement disruptions are, in part, orchestrated by the state agencies governing these young people, placement disruptions constitute an oppressive force. Oppression is allied with loss of control (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and powerlessness (Ross & Mirowsky, 2013). Powerlessness happens when an institution (e.g., a state child welfare agency) unwittingly affects its constituents through systematic constraints (Young, 1990). Combating oppressive forces is the impetus behind Chafee Independence Programs, which demonstrate one type of federal initiative to better include aging out youth in policy, planning, and practice (Children's Bureau, 2012).

Among youth in the general population, sociopolitical development is a process that facilitates one's capacity to act against oppressive forces (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). It is seen as a conduit or precursor to civic action (Dallago, Cristini, Perkins, Nation, & Santinello, 2010; Smith, 1999). Myriad studies have investigated youth councils (Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2009; Wyness, 2009a), student government associations (Russell, Muraco, Subramanian, & Laub, 2009; Wyness, 2009b), and other forms of civic participation (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Janzen, Pancer, Nelson, Loomis, & Hasford, 2010; Malone & Julian, 2005; Stoneman, 2002; Yates & Youniss, 1998) designed for youth in the general population. Less research has focused on similar opportunities for oppressed youth, like those aging out of state care (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; McBride, Sherraden, & Pritzker, 2006). Social welfare professionals and community

psychologists would benefit from a descriptive study of a targeted participation initiative for aging out youth and the allied processes that such an initiative may produce.

Organizational Empowerment

Organizational empowerment refers to "organizational efforts that generate psychological empowerment among members and organizational effectiveness needed for goal achievement" (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 130). Specifically, the literature distinguishes between empowering and empowered organizations. Although empowering organizations are assumed to yield psychological empowerment for individual members, empowered organizations are assumed to influence the macro system they are a part of. It is possible to be an empowering organization without being an empowered one. Although several empirical dimensions comprise the overarching construct of organizational empowerment (see Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004), this study focuses exclusively on three internal processes of the intraorganizational dimension: opportunity role structure, leadership development, and social support.

Opportunity role structure. Opportunity role structure refers to an organization's internal capacity to facilitate the empowerment process (Maton & Salem, 1995; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Opportunity role structure refers to the "availability and configuration of roles within a setting, which provide meaningful opportunities for individuals to develop, grow, and participate" (Maton & Salem, 1995, p. 643). Research (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Stoneman, 2002) suggests that young people need opportunity role structures to make their voices heard. Youth aging out of care may have ideas about how to improve the child welfare systems that govern their lives, but they may not find structures willing to support youth input. In general, young people have opinions: They have perspective on policies that affect them like education, housing, and public safety (B. Checkoway, personal communication, October 2012). Yet youth are more inclined to engage as volunteers, merely because existing structures facilitate service-oriented pathways over activist-oriented ones (Yates & Youniss, 1999).

In addition to domicile, socioeconomic, and, in many cases, racial/ethnic disadvantage, many youth aging out of care are not 18 years old; they cannot vote. These youth are viewed as passive beneficiaries of the government as opposed to citizens capable of changing it (Checkoway et al., 2003; Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2009; Stoneman, 2002). Opportunity role structures provide members with niches to fill and enable empowerment by helping them achieve personal goals through individual participation (Maton & Salem, 1995).

Social support. Social support refers to the social context of an organization (Maton & Salem, 1995). Feeling needed and valued by others is a significant reason for both joining and remaining a member of any group (Brodie et al., 2011). People receive pleasure and emotional fulfillment from their associational memberships (McCarthy, Ondaajte, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004). Not surprisingly, associational members report an almost familial rapport with other members (Maton & Salem, 1995). This is illustrative of Putnam's (2000) assertion that informal social networks have inherent value. To this end, social support is allied with social capital.

Putnam (2000) differentiates between two types of social capital: Bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital refers to building intranetwork solidarity, which youth transitioning out of care are assumed to lack (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). Bridging social capital refers to cultivating internetwork ties. For young people aging out of foster care,

bridging social capital is likely to take the form of a "youth–adult partnership" (see Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008), which can facilitate resilience for this population (Leve, Fisher, & Chamberlain, 2009). Bridging social capital—vis-à-vis a youth–adult partnership—is a process that is useful for linking foster youth to resources that fall outside the purview of their micro networks (Janzen et al., 2010).

Leadership. Another component of intraorganizational empowerment is leadership. In their seminal article, Maton and Salem (1995) note that leadership is a process that may facilitate empowerment through (a) the direct action of a leader and (b) a leader's indirect effect on organizational members. Leaders need to be capable of negotiating among stakeholders with varying interests. Stakeholders can be "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by an organization's achievements" (Freeman, 2010, p. 46). For young people aging out of care, stakeholders may be other similarly situated youth, or they may be allied adults like civic youth workers, policymakers, and respondent parents.

Like all civic endeavors, the literature indicates that the more involved an individual becomes in an associational membership, the more he or she will assume leadership responsibilities, and the better positioned he or she will be to see an issue from another stakeholder's perspective (Putnam, 2000). To illustrate this point, Russell and colleagues (2009) interviewed 15 high school leaders of gay–straight alliances throughout California and found that being an adolescent activist/leader elicited heightened engagement in community and social concerns.

In summary, the existing literature allies aging out with disempowering experiences. Using Maton and Salem's (1995) framework for understanding processes of intraorganizational empowerment, this qualitative study explores the intersection of aging out and civic participation. As this research places focal aging out youth (a less studied population) in a societal context, it makes a unique contribution to the community psychology literature.

METHODS

Sample and Data Collection

Youth Advisory Board (YAB) is a statewide program in New Jersey, which is funded through that state's Department of Children and Families. YAB is implemented locally, though vendor agencies in 12 of 21 counties. Each vendor agency facilitates a local membership that is led by an elected foster youth delegation (president, vice president, secretary, treasurer) that operates under the auspices of a civic youth worker (a professional, adult employee of the vendor agency). Like many associational memberships, youth pick and choose when to attend YAB meetings. Consequently, the literature suggests that commitment to associational membership varies at the individual level (Speer, Jackson, & Peterson, 2001). We assume, however, that members of leadership constitute a recurring organizational commitment (Russell et al., 2009). For this reason, a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2001) was employed to secure 14 YAB leaders (president, vice president, secretary, or treasurer) from the 12 regional memberships for in-depth interviewing and survey research. Their characteristics are described in Table 1.

Per Table 1, the greatest frequency of YAB leaders ($N = 14$) self-identified as female ($n = 10$), Black/African American ($n = 10$), and vice president of their local YAB ($n = 5$). All were between 18 and 23 years of age. Per institutional review board (IRB) agreement,

Table 1. Characteristics of YAB Leaders (N = 14)

		Frequency	*Percent*
Gender	Female	10	71.4
	Male	4	28.6
Race/ethnicity	Black/African American	10	71.4
	Interracial	2	14.3
	Hispanic/Latino	1	7.1
	Does not identify	1	7.1
Age bracket	18–23	14	100.0
Leadership position	Vice president	5	35.7
	President	4	28.6
	Past president or vice president	3	21.4
	Secretary	2	14.3

Note. YAB = Youth Advisory Board.

no recordings of the youth were conducted. Instead, electronic notes were transcribed, whereby the principal investigator typed participant responses in real time, and then orally verified with participants that he had captured their experience correctly. All YAB leaders received $25 for their time.

Twelve civic youth workers (representing each of the 12 YABs throughout New Jersey) were also invited into the study, but only four elected to participate. Although it is difficult to make inferences from a sample of four individuals, it should be noted that the majority of the participating civic youth workers were White/non-Hispanic ($n = 3$) and mostly between 30 and 39 years of age ($n = 3$). There was an even ratio of males to females (2:2). Civic youth workers were not compensated for their participation in the study. Finally, I also conducted a nonparticipant observation of five distinct YAB meetings. These observations took place during a single academic year in both urban ($>50,000$ residents) and suburban ($< 30,000$) communities throughout New Jersey. Nonparticipant observation was conducted in an effort to observe processes of foster youth participation in its naturally occurring environment.

Instrumentation and Data Analysis

The YAB leader and civic youth worker questionnaires—created in concert with methodological and subject matter (child welfare and psychological empowerment) experts—was guided by the three aforementioned internal processes of intraorganizational empowerment (opportunity role structure, leadership, and social support). The questions were as follows: What projects had been pursued and/or accomplished through YAB? Why did one stay involved with YAB? What relationships were acquired through YAB? Surveys (one for YAB leaders and one for civic youth workers) measured (a) the strength of relationships derived through YAB, as perceived by YAB leaders themselves, and (b) civic youth workers' assessments of their own relationships with YAB members. These surveys were designed to yield descriptive data and, as such, were *not* created in concert with previously published and/or validated instruments.

Directed content analysis of questionnaire data was conducted using ATLAS.ti software. Directed content analysis is useful for descriptive research and is a process whereby the questionnaire, initial coding schemas, and results are organized according to existing theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Although directed content analysis is deductive in

nature, it allows for new themes to emerge from the data inductively. In this study, emergent themes are used to support and extend our conventional understanding of intraorganizational empowerment. With respect to univariate analysis of quantitative data, Microsoft Excel produced descriptive statistics and measures of central tendency to compliment the substantive qualitative results. Field notes of nonparticipant observation offer additional context for this study.

Trustworthiness

Truly rigorous qualitative inquiry hinges on the researcher's ability to be reflexive—to be critical about his or her self-involvement in the study and the lens through which he or she sees the world. Because no researcher can completely divorce him or herself from prior experience, it is important to disclose a little about the researcher in question, who is both part of the research instrument and the conduit for data analysis. I was adopted at birth and spent my emerging adulthood participating in civil society initiatives like political canvassing and volunteering for child welfare organizations. I have also been a professional political aide, in which my job functions included sustained interface with public and private child welfare and human service stakeholders.

To the extent that I have a personal investment in the focal population of youth aging out of care, this research may classify as semiheuristic inquiry (Patton, 2001), which may lend this study some inherent credibility. Although I was the only individual to code and analyze the data, I deliberately sought credibility through academic rigor by triangulating methods of data collection (in-depth interviews with youth and adults, survey research with youth and adults, and nonparticipant observation of YAB meetings throughout New Jersey). Per this disclosure, I adhere to Patton's (2001) belief that establishing and maintaining credibility and confirmability is the bedrock for trustworthiness in qualitative research.

RESULTS

The emergent themes of this study, which support and extend our understanding of intraorganizational empowerment for young people aging out of foster care, are as follows: (a) *civic literacy*, (b) *YAB as family*, and (c) *privileged positions*. These are themes that emerged from the data inductively. In other words, they were not expressly probed for in the questionnaire, yet all participants ($N = 14$) illustrated or explicated them. These themes are explored at length below and organized according to the existing processes of intraorganizational empowerment (opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership) that they support and extend.

Opportunity Role Structure

Opportunity role structure refers to an organization's internal capacity to facilitate the empowerment process (Maton & Salem, 1995; Watts & Flanagan, 2007) by providing roles and niches to be filled by members of the organization. When asked to chronicle a typical YAB meeting—or how the group works—YAB leaders described organizational processes similar to other associational, civil society memberships. One leader indicated that "the group works like standard government. We have a President and Vice President, and it trickles down from there." Adherence to an agenda—usually created by a YAB's

president—was emphasized in all ($N = 14$) the YAB leader interviews and observed at all five YAB meetings. Several participants noted that even if leaders set the agenda, full YAB memberships decide on the YAB projects (both service- and activist-oriented). Per these observations, all YAB leaders in this study ($N = 14$) demonstrated an intimate knowledge of democratic processes, which they may not have been privy to in the absence of YAB. Herein lies the first emergent theme, civic literacy, as brought about by the opportunity role structure of YAB.

Civic literacy refers to knowledge about civil society, its composition, and the processes and outcomes associated with civic engagement. Civic engagement is broadly defined by two actions: community service and activism (Boyte, 2005; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Malone & Julian, 2005; Walker, 2000; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Academic discourse indicates that young people's engagement is often confined to service and devoid of activism (B. Checkoway, personal communication, October 2012). However, one civic youth worker noted that "the central purpose of YAB is to make youth aware of what is going on with the services that are offered to them statewide. This is an opportunity for them to help change policies and procedures." Although youth in this study were not expressly asked to discuss the dichotomy between service and activism, most of them implicitly separated the actions. "In general, I think YAB is about advocacy and community service," said one YAB leader.

Deciding what population should be the recipients of YAB community service efforts was observed at one meeting in the northern part of New Jersey. It was nearing Valentine's Day and half of the membership wanted to volunteer its time at a local nursing home, while the other half wanted to create gift baskets for teen mothers. After lengthy debate, led by the group's president, it was decided (by a vote) that teen mothers would benefit (the YAB had previously volunteered at the same nursing home). Additionally, teen mothers were assumed the more "needy" population. The conversation of what constitutes "need" is illustrative of a political savvy that may not always permeate volunteer youth service. This savvy supports the emergent theme of civic literacy, which can be attributed to the opportunity role structure that YAB provides.

Social Support

The start of any YAB meeting is not unlike other associational memberships. It begins with leaders and members trickling into the conference room of a vendor agency and catching up on their time apart. There may or may not be food to snack on, but it is apparent that one is in a cordial, friendly atmosphere, regardless. As one civic youth worker observes, "YAB is a community where foster youth find others who can relate to their experiences." Social support—another intraorganizational process of organizational empowerment—refers to the social context of an organization (Maton & Salem, 1995). From an organizational perspective, social support is assumed to facilitate psychological empowerment. Social capital—an allied construct—refers to the intrinsic value of social networks (Putnam, 2000) and is identified by two broad types: bonding and bridging.

All ($N = 14$) YAB leaders described YAB as family, which comprises the second emergent theme of this study. The YAB as family theme is demonstrative of bonding (intranetwork) social capital. One leader said, "I think that through working with them—the YAB—we've grown into a family. Whether we have individual problems or not doesn't matter. At YAB, it's like, 'Hey girl, we gotta get this done.'" Other YAB leaders described similar family-type relationships with co-leaders and lay members:

Table 2. Youth Relationships: "On a Scale of 1 To 5–With 1 Being "Not Important" and 5 Being "Very Important"–Please Indicate the Value You Place on Your Relationships With the Following . . . " (N = 14)

	M
Your YAB coordinator (civic youth worker)	4.9
Community leaders you've met through YAB	4.8
Other YAB leaders	4.6
Other YAB members	4.4
YAB alumni	4.2
Your family[a]	4.2
Friends from school	3.2

Note. M = mean; YAB = Youth Advisory Board.
[a]One participant declined to answer this question.

> My relationship with everyone involved with YAB is not procedural–we're family . . . . I've hung with a couple of them—the older ones—we go out for drinks; the younger ones, I go bowling with . . . . We're a family first, colleagues second.

> My relationship with other YAB folks is they all drive me crazy, but I love them more than anything . . . . They're like little knucklehead brothers and sisters . . . . I'm one of the older kids there so I do a lot of the leadership . . . . We all work close together.

Some leaders discussed service- and activist-oriented initiatives that incorporated other YAB boards, which—to the extent that those collaborations built intranetwork solidarity—is further evidence of bonding social capital and social support. As one YAB leader attests, "I serve on [a statewide committee] with [a YAB leader from another county], so we've started facilitating things together and supporting each other's events." According to another leader, "We invite [another county's YAB] to come visit us all the time. We stay in touch. We're like a family."

The notion of YAB as family extended to leaders' perceptions of internetwork ties (bridging social capital), as illustrated by their relationships with civic youth workers. One participant offers a uniquely profound illustration: "My coordinator [civic youth worker] is the only man in my life that I have called my dad. He has been there forever. He's the only person who came to my high school graduation. He's always there for me." To the extent that YAB as family builds relational solidarity and enables YAB leaders to work with others in pursuit of policy change, this YAB as family theme may be capable of producing psychological empowerment for individual members.

Table 2, which depicts an inventory of YAB leader relationships, is further evidence of the perceived rapport that youth leaders have with their civic youth workers.

As evidenced by Table 2, the YAB leaders in this study consider their relationships with civic youth workers the "most important" (4.9 on a 5-point scale), in comparison to other groups like family (4.2 on a 5-point scale) and friends from school (3.2 on a 5-point scale). Although civic youth worker data are limited in this study, it is important to note that civic youth workers did *not* confirm the perceived strengths of these relationships. All civic youth workers ($N = 4$) spoke in composite fashion about YAB leaders and members alike. Nevertheless, Table 3 illustrates that civic youth workers are often asked to engage with YAB members in ways that are unrelated to YAB itself.

Table 3. Civic Youth Worker Assistance: "On a Scale of 1 To 5–With 1 Being "Never" and 5 Being "Very Often"–Indicate the Extent to Which You May Assist YAB Participants in the Following . . . " (N = 4)

	M
YAB alumni stay in contact with me	3.8
I help YAB participants in areas of life that are unrelated to YAB	3.8
I mentor YAB participants in areas of life that are unrelated to YAB	3.3
I am asked to write letters of reference for YAB participants, for educational purposes (scholarships, college admission, etc.)	2.5
I am asked to write letters of reference for YAB participants, for professional purposes (employment, etc.)	2.3

Note. M = mean; YAB = Youth Advisory Board.

Per Table 3, when civic youth workers were asked to quantify the frequency with which they helped YAB participants (leaders and general members) in five predetermined areas, their composite results suggest that workers are "sometimes" asked to provide assistance unrelated to YAB. One civic youth worker described the types of assistance offered: "I have done everything from buy and drop off diapers, give rides to work, wait while the results of a pregnancy test came back . . . and help secure housing."

The notion of civic youth workers serving as resources to YAB members was observed firsthand when at a local women's history event, a YAB leader in this sample was to receive a commendation from the state legislature in recognition of her foster care activism. Other women were also being honored: A county surrogate, the founding pastor of a church, and an immigration lawyer among them. All honorees received five free tickets to the event, but the focal leader brought only her civic youth worker. When accepting the award, the focal leader said, "Most of all, I want thank [civic youth worker's name] because without her I wouldn't be here." The audience clapped and then the leader quipped, "No, really, without her I wouldn't have had a ride."

Leadership

The primary participants in this study are YAB leaders ($N = 14$). All civic youth workers work hand in hand with YAB leaders to fulfill the YAB mission of "empowering youth for a better future" (Youth Advisory Board, n.d.). A third intraorganizational process is leadership. Leadership is a process that may facilitate empowerment through (a) the direct action of a leader and (b) a leader's indirect effect on organizational members (Maton & Salem, 1995). This may be achieved by a YAB leader's actual ability to not only manage and execute change-oriented projects but also create a legacy:

> I feel as though it was important for me to be a leader because it was important to set an example for the younger guys. If I can help some of them—the ones that are just entering the system—I am very glad to do that.

Research suggests that leaders exhibit heightened engagement in community and social concerns (Russell et al., 2009). Less consensus exists around what makes one become a leader, though Larson (2000) associates leadership development with initiative. How and why YAB leaders in this study pursued their elected positions varies at the individual level, with some offering rational and succinct motivation (e.g., "I like to be in charge"),

and others offering a more nuanced explanation (e.g., "I want to be heard . . . as long as my voice is getting across, people can choose to listen or not").

Within broad guidelines, the president and vice president of a focal YAB chart a course for their membership. With civic youth workers, they create agendas that are project-oriented, which are then approved or disapproved by the lay membership. In spite of this democratic structure, all leaders in this sample ($N = 14$) discussed the perceived benefits of their office. One leader said, "When [a civic youth worker] wants people to represent [vendor agency's name], it's usually me and my vice president. A couple months ago, [our civic youth worker] had us talk to a parenting group." Other participants expanded upon the perceived benefits afforded to YAB leaders:

> As the leader, I attend the statewide YAB coordinator meetings . . . I've spoken at conferences . . . I was on the search committee for the [division director's position at the Department of Children and Families (DCF)] . . . I'm facilitating the youth summit . . . I'm on the taskforce for helping youth with placement issues . . . I attend the child-in-court improvement committee . . . the list goes on and on.

Per the visibility described above, the final emergent theme of this study pertains to a leader's (perceived) privileged position of leadership. In addition to being tasked with "high visibility" assignments, all YAB leaders ($N = 14$) described their relationships with civic youth workers as collegial, whereas their relationships with the workers/lay members had more of a "teacher–student" dynamic. One leader explained, "We're with these adults all the time. We have personal meetings with them . . . . The adults and the regular members don't have that." According to another leader, "We've gotten good at talking with the adults, but I know that's not true for the regular members." Leaders in this study also perceived themselves to have greater access to state and local officials as well as community leaders as part of their privileged positions. One leader explains, "One particular person—the director of [DCF division]—she helped me out in getting some things that I needed, and I wouldn't have had access to her without YAB."

Despite holding these privileged positions, being a leader is arduous, as Putnam (2000) and others have noted. According to a YAB leader from this study, "The difference between being president and a [lay] member is that even though all of this is volunteer, it's not volunteer for the leaders. It's work." The "incorporation" stage of Kieffer's (1984) participatory competence framework refers to the civic leader experiencing struggle and exercising strategic ability.

These processes (experiencing struggle and exercising ability) were observed at a local YAB meeting when a lay member expressed her displeasure with the executive board for arranging a discussion with DCF officials about targeted services for Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) youth in care. The young woman argued that time spent with DCF officials should have been better utilized. The president retorted, "A lot of people don't know there are LGBTQ youth in care because a lot of us haven't been given the opportunity to talk about those issues, and tonight we have an opportunity to talk with DCF, and we're going to take one step at a time." As the lay member walked toward the exit, the president cautioned, "I respect your decision to leave, but please remember that—as a member of YAB—you made a commitment to helping all kids in care, whether you like them or not."

To the extent that leaders in this sample experience struggle and exercise strategic ability—as illustrated by the preceding anecdote—their "privileged positions" of

leadership may illustrate Kieffer's (1984) incorporation stage of participatory competence, which is one of four stages of encountering empowerment as a developmental trajectory. In other words, occupying a privileged position of leadership may affect services for other youth in care (e.g., LGBTQ youth in care), facilitate psychological empowerment, and create a legacy for the focal leader.

Through their words and actions, all YAB leaders in this study ($N = 14$) corroborated Russell and colleagues' (2009) assumption that leadership demonstrates a heightened organizational commitment. As one leader explained, "We see the bigger picture; [lay members] see what's up the block." Nevertheless, all YAB leaders ($N = 14$) enjoyed their relationships with general members, and all explicated a desire to pursue change on behalf of other children in care.

DISCUSSION

This research used cross sectional, in-depth interviews, and descriptive survey research with 14 foster YAB leaders in the state of New Jersey. I also used in-depth interviews and survey research with civic youth workers (AKA adult coordinators) and five nonparticipant observations, to describe and explore processes of foster YAB participation. The questions were guided by Maton and Salem's (1995) framework for understanding processes of intraorganizational empowerment, which comprise opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership (among other processes).

Through directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), this research identified three emergent themes (civic literacy, YAB as family, and privileged positions), each of which corresponds to a process of intraorganizational empowerment (opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership). These themes support and extend intraorganizational empowerment's application to a less studied population: Young people aging out of state child welfare systems.

Because of the opportunity role structures afforded by New Jersey's YABs, young people in this study are assumed to have developed a civic literacy about how to exercise democratic governance and how to effect change through their focal board. Because of the social support that each local board provides, leaders in this study unanimously reported that YAB functioned "as a family" (YAB as family), which is illustrative of relational solidarity that can produce feelings of empowerment.

Finally, through their privileged positions of leadership, youth in this study effected change through their own direct action and created legacies for themselves through the initiatives they prioritized. Additionally, these "privileged positions" of leadership also refer to the perception, among YAB leaders in this study, of heightened relationships with civic youth workers and other allied adults.

Implications

Implications for policy. Policymakers will benefit from this in-depth understanding of constituent voices (specifically young people aging out of foster care) that are often oppressed or silenced in civic and political discourse. As these 14 young people are heard, it is my hope that policymakers will be responsive to their needs and the notion that targeted participatory initiatives can build capacity for this traditionally disempowered and oppressed group. Many young people do care about the policies that affect them, and through targeted channels and pathways to participation that include activism (not just

service-oriented pathways), young people aging out of care can make their voices heard and, perhaps, make a difference in the lives of others.

Implications for practice. This research is based on a project conducted in a single state (New Jersey), which facilitates local iterations of a statewide YAB in 12 of 21 counties. I advocate the creation of a uniform, national YAB model, which can be implemented with fidelity to the national model throughout each of the 50 states and Washington, DC. In the absence of fidelity, there will be variance with respect to how each board is implemented. Similarly, without fidelity to the model, the processes that one experiences from participating in a local board may not be congruent with processes encountered by members of another board. Also, the national model must have clearly operationalized goals. Operationalization must specify how service and activism are linked so that they do not occur in silo, as separately executed projects. I believe that such a model can serve child welfare practitioners well, as the profession continually calls upon its practitioners to facilitate partnerships with clients.

Implications for research. Future research should further explore processes allied with civic participation among aging out youth. Future research must occur via measuring the aforementioned constructs with larger samples and validated survey instruments. In the absence of a national YAB model, however, comprehensive, large-scale intervention research will be difficult.

Limitations

This study recruited leaders from 12 regional memberships of YAB, a statewide foster youth engagement initiative. In an effort to capture a homogenously involved experience, this study adheres to Russell and colleagues' (2009) inference that leadership is a dimension of organizational commitment; however, this study excludes lay members who may, in fact, be more involved in YAB than some elected leaders. This study is not representative of all youth aging out of care or even all of New Jersey's aging out youth. Similarly, qualitative research is context-bound. Each participant experiences reality differently. As such, the lens each brings to the civic arena differs; the processes they encounter also differ. The process-oriented themes uncovered here present the essence of the civic participation experience for youth leaders in this study and should not be generalized beyond this sample.

Although a major strength of this research pertains to the triangulation of data collection methods (in-depth interviews and survey research with both YAB leaders and civic youth workers, as well as five nonparticipant observations of YAB meetings that occurred during a full academic year), an additional limitation pertains to data analysis. Because of limitations in financial and human capital, all data analysis transferred through a single researcher (myself). To complicate this limitation, IRB protocol expressly prohibited the audio or video recording of YAB leaders, because the respective IRB deemed the participants to be a protected category of research. Ergo, I transcribed all interviews in real time.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, I believe that this research has profound implications for policy, practice, and future research for young people aging out of state systems of care. I also

believe that this research has both supported and expanded traditional understandings of intraorganizational empowerment, by utilizing Maton & Salem's (1995) framework with a population (young people aging out of foster care) that is not commonly studied in the field of community psychology. This research contends that civic literacy acquired through YAB's opportunity role structure, perceptions of YAB as family acquired through the social structure of YAB, and the benefits afforded to a YAB member's privileged position of leadership are emergent themes that support and extend existing theory for the 14 foster youth in this study.

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