

## **Critical Theory View of the National FFA Convention**

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*Urban FFA members face unique challenges if they want to become active members in the National FFA Organization. FFA leaders have realized that the FFA organization does not represent the evolving demographics of America and have made efforts to cater to urban and diverse high school audiences with some success. This study seeks to explore this phenomenon from the perspective of urban and diverse agriculture students through the use of a critical theory lens. This paper focuses on one group of urban FFA members and how they interpreted FFA culture while attending the National FFA Convention. The critical theory framework herein focuses on how these urban FFA members comprehended the FFA's rural and production-oriented agricultural themes. The Harris FFA members had the cultural resiliency to internalize the different cultural values they experienced and personally connect with some pieces of the culture presented. These members overlooked or adapted to the rural, White, and traditional agriculture values of FFA; but, more importantly, they focused on the leadership and community development values of FFA.*

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Urban FFA members face unique challenges if they want to become active members in the National FFA Organization. These challenges could stem from the context of the National FFA Organization. The National FFA Organization has nurtured their historical linkages to rural America (Martin & Kitchel, 2014). The context of rural America is quite different than that of urban America. First, urban centers are geographically unconnected to rural America, which is the traditional location for agriculture. The National FFA Organization has many activities focusing on production agriculture (e.g., livestock and grain production related activities or events), which are typically found in rural areas. While some FFA activities do fit within an urban context (e.g., veterinary science or agricultural research activities or events), these types of activities are limited. Urban centers are also more ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse compared to many rural communities. The agrarian themes present in rural traditions, including FFA, would possibly be alien to urban residents (Allen, 2004). For instance, the rural undertones present in the traditions (e.g., the themes present in the Creed and FFA Opening Ceremonies) and activities may seem foreign to urban students (Hoover, & Scanlon, 1991; Phelps, Henry, & Bird, 2012). These differences could lead to ideological disconnects between urban students and FFA.

Research on FFA diversity has revealed interesting findings related to member participation in FFA. Agriculture teachers have recognized that diverse students lack role models in agricultural education (LaVergne, Larke, Elbert, & Jones, 2011), and FFA stakeholders have had to utilize interventions to increase the diverse members' interest in participating in FFA (Roberts, Hall, Gill, Shinn, Larke, & Jaure, 2009). Teachers have also identified stereotypes as a barrier to diverse members' FFA participation (Gliem & Gliem, 2000; Talbert & Larke, 1995; Warren & Alston, 2007); and involvement in agriculture programs (Jones, 1998a, 1998b). There

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may be some historical precedence for these negative views (Talbert, Larke, & Jones, 1999), including the historical decline of African-Americans in FFA after the merger with New Farmers of America (NFA) (Wakefield & Talbert, 2003). The barriers urban FFA members face related to their own traditions or background has also been researched. Urban FFA members' local context and lack of production agriculture resources could be viewed as a disadvantage if compared to their rural FFA counterparts (Smith & Baggett, 2012). For instance, the State FFA Degree requires a significant amount of time and money invested and earned while working in a supervised agricultural experience (National FFA Organization [FFA], 2009). The money and time requirement for the State FFA Degree can be difficult for urban students to attain due to after-school responsibilities (Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005).

We are not saying all urban FFA programs or FFA programs with predominantly diverse members will not find success. The achievements of urban FFA programs in certain metropolitan centers around the country, such as the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, provide examples of successful urban FFA chapters (Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, & Ball, 2008). Researchers have also profiled successful urban agriculture programs (Bird, Tummons, Martin, & Henry, 2013; Henry, Talbert, & Morris, 2014; Soloninka, 2003), preferences of urban students (Anderson & Kim, 2009; Esters & Bowen, 2004, 2005), and the process of starting an urban agriculture program (Brown & Kelsey, 2013; Shumacher, Fuhrman, & Duncan, 2012). Furthermore, a survey designed to identify urban agriculture students' perceived barriers to FFA participation revealed no perceived barriers (Martin & Kitchel, 2014). However, the success of some urban FFA programs does not change the ideological disconnects which may exist for some urban FFA members. This issue may become important as American society continues to urbanize and diversify in the coming decades (Moule, 2011). FFA advisors and stakeholders need to develop a clearer concept of how FFA culturally fits within the urban context.

FFA leaders have realized that the National FFA Organization may not represent the evolving demographics of America (FFA, 2014), and they have made efforts to cater to urban and diverse high school audiences (LaVergne, Jones, Larke, & Elbert, 2012; Vincent & Torres, 2011) with some success. Research has shown the power of perception with FFA membership (Croom & Flowers, 2001). Some of the success has stemmed from intervention programs designed to increase minority participation in FFA (Roberts et al., 2009). The prescribed interventions focus on emphasizing the opportunities of the organization to urban and diverse students by engaging those students with adult role models who have culturally similar backgrounds in agriculture and FFA. The interventions did not explore how local FFA leaders can adapt the FFA programs to match the needs of diverse students. Furthermore, few researchers have examined the possible barriers of FFA for diverse FFA members (LaVergne et al., 2012; Martin & Kitchel, 2014). This study seeks to explore this phenomenon from the perspective of urban and diverse agriculture students through the use of a critical theory lens.

Previous research on youth organizations and critical theory provides some initial insight on this mismatching of FFA ideals with the urban/minority population's nonagricultural reality. Simply stated, if a student does not feel like he or she belongs or cannot relate to a group, then that student will not participate (Larson, 1994). Students' perception of their cultural fit within an organization influences their decision to participate (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005; Harvard Family Research Project, 2004). For example, Asian and Pacific Island youth in Sacramento were experiencing racial prejudice from some of the city's residents who had developed misconceptions because of the crime in their communities. A group of concerned youth formed an organization to change these misconceptions. The members of the organization worked to keep youth out of prison and combat the public perception of youth as criminals (Kwon, 2006). The work of this youth organization helped change the perception many had in Sacramento about Asian and Pacific Island youth. Researchers indicate that this Sacramento youth organization was successful because it directly tied into the needs and culture of urban youth. While the FFA is not engaged in this particular mission (i.e., urban social justice),

previous studies have highlighted the power of culture and youth engagement. The significance of culture on urban youths' decision to participate in FFA is critical when considering FFA's traditional agriculture and rural heritage themes.

### **Purpose of the Critical Inquiry**

The purpose of this critical inquiry was to explore urban FFA members' interpretations of the culture of FFA while attending the 2012 National FFA Convention. The framework of critical theory focused our analysis on how the urban FFA members comprehended the rural and production-oriented agricultural themes of FFA. This study aligned to Priority Area Five (Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs) of the American Association for Agricultural Education's (AAAE) National Research Agenda (Doerfert, 2011).

### **Conceptual Framework of Critical Theory**

Critical theory in education emerged into predominance with the work of Paulo Freire. His internationally acclaimed books, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2003) and *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973) argued for an education focused on social justice. Schools and educational programs were presented as places for reproducing the social inequities of society or places for liberation from oppression. Freire believed in the latter vision for schools. The dialogue between those who perpetuate the social inequalities (the oppressors) and the people who are targets of social inequalities (the oppressed) is crucial. Freire argued that both groups are victims of social inequality because the oppressor loses their humanity when they oppress. This utilization of critical theory for educational practice is referred to as critical pedagogy (MacLaren, 2009). Thus, critical pedagogy must involve everyone in school or educational programs to ensure that social justice can help alleviate the inequalities of society.

Contemporary researchers have built upon Freire's call for critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2008; Wight, 2013). Schools and educational programs often reinforce the negative social stratification of America, and educators must actively work against this stratification to ensure social equality and justice (Giroux, 1981; Kincheloe, 1991; Kincheloe & MacLaren, 2008). A key concept in critical pedagogy research is the hegemony of a school or educational program. Hegemony refers to the established dominate thoughts, values, and actions of a group (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 1981). While there can be multiple forms and levels of hegemony in a given group, educationalists usually discuss only the dominate hegemony of a school or educational group. Dominate hegemony would be the written and unwritten rules which govern the actions and norms of the whole group. Hegemony can be difficult to interpret because it is rarely articulated in daily life. For instance, Americans are rarely told that our capitalist economy requires us to spend money on consumer items.

Researchers and practitioners often examine how hegemony is enforced and reproduced to understand better the hegemony itself. This process of enforcement and reproduction is referred to as ideology. So, going back to the previous example, the capitalistic hegemony of America is revealed through the consumer driven nature of our media (i.e., advertisement driven). Researchers and practitioners often focus on ideologies because these forces are easier to identify and describe as compared to hegemony.

Michael Apple (1982, 2004) provided some key concepts for understanding how hegemony and ideology functions in a school system. Ideology can be revealed overtly or covertly. For example, a teacher who has a sign posted mandating that students must not talk to their neighbors during study is enforcing a teacher-centered view of teaching. Ideology is also often reinforced covertly. For instance, a teacher placing chairs in rows gives students less

physical opportunities to interact with each other, which favors a teacher-centered approach. Ideologies should be viewed as a natural consequence of any group; however, ideologies should be examined to understand the effect they have on people in that group. Ideologies are the tools of critical theory researchers and are studied to gain a better understanding of how schools and education programs either breakdown or reinforce the inequitable hegemonies in American society. Figure 1 graphically represents the interplay of hegemony and ideology using the educational example.

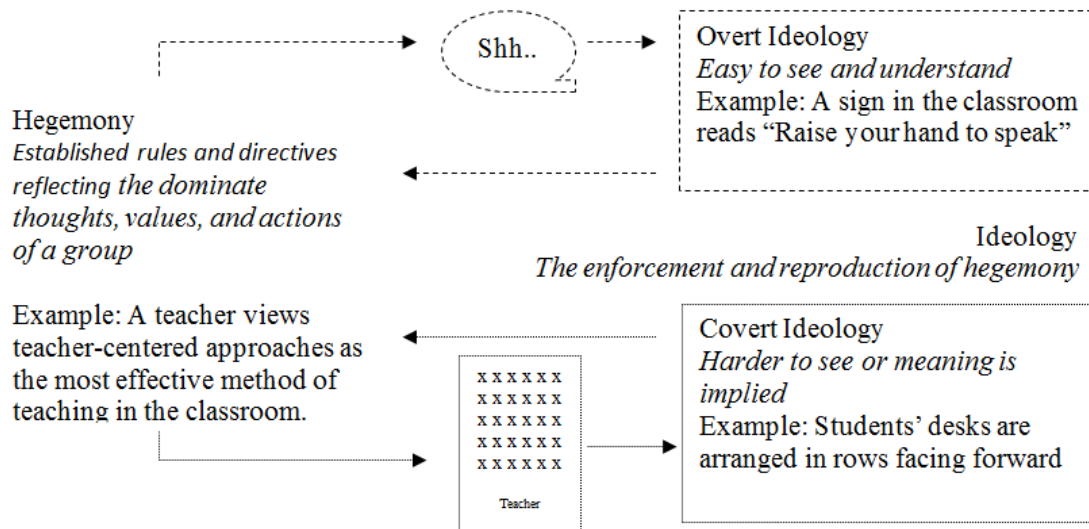


Figure 1. The interplay between hegemony and ideology

While no researcher has viewed FFA directly from a critical theory framework, previous research indicates an ideology at play. In short, the ideology of FFA tends to focus on Caucasian, rural, and traditional agriculture (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Lawrence, Rayfield, Moore, & Outley, 2013; Phelps, Henry, & Bird, 2012; Wakefield & Talbert, 2003). Furthermore, Martin and Kitchel (2013) found the traditions of FFA are grounded in agrarian traditions, and these traditions would indicate the presence of overt and covert ideologies in FFA. An implication from this study was that diverse and urban students could be alienated by this hegemony as represented by a hidden curriculum of FFA traditions. The National FFA Organization understands that there is a need to investigate these issues (FFA, 2014). More research is needed to identify how the hegemony of FFA might influence urban agriculture students' decision to participate in FFA. We want to emphasize that these components represent a natural process of social systems and are not inherently bad. Nonetheless, the National FFA Organization, as an educational system needs to be examined through a critical theory lens to explore the ideology of FFA and ensure that all FFA members can benefit from participation in the organization.

**Critical Theory Methods**

Critical theory research questions the dominant ideology of social groups and seeks to empower people who are alienated by that dominate ideology (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Kincheloe, 1991). Critical theory methods are termed as bricolage. Bricolage is a French word roughly translating as "handy person". As a critical theory method, bricolage utilizes resources that can offer historiographical, ideological, and social perspectives, which might otherwise be overlooked in traditional qualitative research. In this study, the source of these perspectives was a

high school class made up of urban students who were able to attend an FFA meeting based on a class they took. A bricolage approach emphasizes using the appropriate data collection and data analysis tools for the phenomenon under study. Researchers working under the critical theory epistemology will use a variety of research methods (i.e., history, ethnography, case studies, etc.) to answer questions related to power and ideology in society (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012; Koro-Ljungber, 2012; Shields, 2012).

We wanted to uncover the ideological forces influencing the participation of urban FFA members. The interpretations of urban FFA members were central to the problem being studied. The urban FFA members were outside of the dominant ideology of FFA (i.e., rural and agriculturally centered) and their views of FFA would naturally be different than rural FFA members. The authors' role as insiders in FFA helped build the framework for this study. However, as former FFA members and FFA advisors, our viewpoints can only provide context to the urban FFA experience. The urban members' input provided the structure of this study.

This study involved the FFA members of Harris High School. Harris High School is a magnet school set in the center of the metropolitan area of Sharpsburg, which has over 2.5 million residents including the surrounding area. The school had two agriculture teachers with their own curriculum pathways: veterinary science, taught by Mrs. Hansen, and horticulture, which was taught by Ms. Warner. Both teachers were Caucasian and female. Only FFA members attending the National FFA Convention were included in this study. Seventeen FFA members from Harris attended the convention and 15 of those members were part of this study. The student demographics of the group were ten Caucasians, three African-Americans, one Hispanic, and one biracial member. The group consisted of 14 females and one male. The members had limited experience in traditional production agriculture or rural culture. Two of the senior FFA members had attended the 2011 National FFA Convention the previous year; however, most of the members going to the convention had attended only one FFA event beyond the local level.

Data were collected during the National FFA Convention. We conducted five focus groups with the Harris FFA members over two evenings. The discussion revolved around what the students saw, heard, learned, and thought based on the experiences of the previous day. The focus groups ranged from 15 minutes to over 30 minutes in length. We observed the members six times during the convention. These observations occurred during the career show, the convention's opening session, and leadership workshop. We followed small groups of students throughout these events, which could last from 45 minutes to 2 hours.

The data analysis process focused on finding and articulating the ideological forces of FFA within the experiences of the Harris FFA Members. The critical theory framework helped us interpret the transcripts regarding how these ideological forces might appear in the narratives. We followed five steps during our data analysis process. First, we highlighted passages in the data where members' experienced isolation, unease, or alienation. Second, we coded these passages for themes. The third step was to arrange the highlighted passages according to the themes which emerged, including race, accents, etc. The fourth step was to articulate how members' feelings of isolation, unease, or alienation fit into the larger perspective of FFA ideology. This step required defining FFA ideology based on previous studies as being centered on rural and production agriculture topics and the majority of members being rural and White (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991; Lawrence et al., 2013; Martin & Kitchel, 2013; Phelps, Henry, & Bird, 2012; Wakefield & Talbert, 2003). The final fifth step of the research analysis was to reread the transcripts to find more instances which might reaffirm or deny our findings.

The standards for trustworthiness are complex for critical inquiry. Critical inquiry arose because standard methods of research (i.e., quantitative, post-positivist, etc.) could not explain the lived experiences of marginalized groups. Thus, critical inquiry studies require alternative modes for maintaining trustworthiness. Member's voice and positionality of truth in analysis are central in critical inquiry. Positionality of truth refers to the concept that what is true for one person may not be true for another (Lincoln, 1995). We had to ensure that the voices of the Harris FFA

members were central to our findings and that differing views among the students were also featured. The exclusion and or subordination of their voice would marginalize their experiences. We had to work to develop the positionality of truth of judgments. We did this by providing explanations, details, observations, and member quotes.

### **Results from the Critical Inquiry**

The urban FFA members experienced events at the National FFA Convention that were culturally different from what they were accustomed to. The Harris FFA Chapter members were accustomed to being in multicultural and ethnic crowds. However, this is not what we witnessed at the convention. The results section was divided into four parts beginning with the three cultural disconnects experienced by the Harris FFA members 1) few people of color, 2) southern, rural accents, and 3) rural traditions, followed by 4) their attempt to assimilate or fit into the dominate FFA culture presented at convention.

#### **Few People of Color**

The FFA members in attendance were overwhelmingly White (we utilized White instead of Caucasian and Black instead of African-American to mimic how the FFA members described race). It can be likened to a sea of black pants/skirts and corduroy blue jackets with White faces emerging from almost every jacket. A White FFA member can become anonymous at the height of the FFA Career Show crowd. Everyone can start to look the same, except when the face emerging out of the blue corduroy jacket is of color. They appear as anomalies that stick out from the crowd. You immediately recognize that FFA members of color are different from the crowd, and the Harris FFA members of color pointed this out. Tina, one of the two Black members from Harris, became visibly excited when she saw another cluster of Black FFA members at the Career Expo. She pointed and whispered something to the other Black member from Harris at the convention. At this moment she realized she was really a minority. Tina would later say in a focus group, "It's like everywhere I turned someone was White." She recognized that students of color were a real minority in this setting.

Debra, another Black member, had similar feelings during her first day at the career show. Debra and Tina were trying to obtain autographs from FFA members from different states. Mrs. Hansen and Ms. Warner, the FFA advisors, were awarding prizes to Harris FFA members who obtained a signature from an FFA member from each state. Debra and Tina were motivated by this challenge. They frequently stopped members and asked where they were from or walked around members to read what state they were from, since each member's home state was embroidered on the back of their FFA jacket. Debra reported White FFA members giving her and Tina "weird looks" and acting nervous:

Tina: Some of them didn't even like to talk. They were just ah.

Debra: They've got different accents and some were just jittery...and some of them just don't care.

Moderator: You said some of them seem kind of jittery?

Debra: Yes.

Debra and Tina did not report any of the FFA members they interacted with as being overtly rude to them. Their asking random FFA members for signatures also may have caused nervous reactions. Nonetheless, they both reported feeling racially isolated as two Black females at the Career Show.

José, the sole Hispanic member from Harris, had a similar experience when he found a fellow Cuban-American FFA member. He spotted her walking down the Career Expo aisle and claimed to know she was Cuban by looking at her. He spent some time talking to her. José had gone to the 2011 National FFA Convention, and this was the first time he had meet another

Cuban-American FFA member. The members talked about the meeting during the focus group at the end of the day:

Martha: Tell him about the Cuban thing.

Moderator: You can go ahead. Yes, tell us about the Cuban girl.

José: I met this girl. She's Cuban and she was also Nicaraguan which is my special blend.

Moderator: Did you talk to her at all or no?

José: Yes, yes. I actually did.

Moderator: How long did you talk to her?

José: A minute.

Moderator: A minute?

José: Yes. We had to both part ways, you know.

Moderator: Where was she from?

José: Florida.

He understood this event to be rare and appreciated it. Skin color was an overt representation of the dominate ideology of FFA experienced by Harris FFA members. The vast majority of FFA members at the convention were White and rural, which was not lost on the Harris FFA members. The White members from Harris also noticed something different.

### **Southern, Rural Accents and Dialects**

The Harris FFA members heard accents that were strange to them. They interpreted these accents as being rural and southern in dialect. Obviously, the Harris FFA members realized that not everyone had this specific accent; however, they believed that this accent was typical in the context of FFA. Shirley said, "You could tell the difference because if someone walked by and [they] have the southern accent, you could tell right way he was from the southern states." Helen attempted to mimic the accent she had heard, "Some of them talk like this (with a southern twang)."

Many of the members enjoyed hearing the dialects of many FFA members, yet they became conscious of their own accent. They described their accent as urban and distinctly different than many of the southern, rural accents they were hearing. Interestingly, some members had fun with the accents they were hearing, calling them "sexy":

Moderator: What did you notice about them, anything interesting?

Mary: Some of their accents.

Brittany: Their accents.

Lisa: They had really nice accents.

Mary: Very sexy.

Brittany: They talk like this [with a southern twang].

They were forced to think about their own dialect, as well. Some members realized they could positively affect their FFA counterparts with southern accents. Janet, a white FFA member from Harris, said, "We were probably coming off a little too strong, but I think if we are energetic we can help people be energetic too." Sometimes these differences created feelings of uneasiness.

The differences in dialects led some of the Harris FFA members to change how they talked to fit in with the southern and rural accents they were hearing. Debra mentioned this in a focus group exchange:

Moderator: You don't want to talk the way you normally talk in front of them.

Debra: No

Moderator: You're nervous. You said you change your voice when you talk to other members?

Debra: Mmhmm (affirmative).

Moderator: Okay. Do you think they will say something or think something?

Barbara: We didn't think so.

Martha: They won't say nothing. I feel like they [other FFA members] like your accent.

Tina: That's the main thing somebody will say.

Debra: That's a polite way of saying it.

Tina: You have very country accent.

José: You've got a very unique accent.

Tina: Yes.

Moderator: Okay... do you feel a real dominance of ruralness here?

José: Ruralness? I think there is a bunch of rural kids here.

Moderator: Really? Is it overbearing?

José: It's not overbearing....

Moderator: You think it's cool?

José: Yes.

Moderator: Why do you hide it then?

Debra: [Purposively speaking in slang] Because I's going to come up 'n they've got a country name. You're like "oh yeah" and they like "ya'll" and all of that. We cut our words up and they're just slang.

Debra internalized the dominate ideology of dialects she had in her consciousness. She deemed her own accent as negative. However, this was more than just an issue with White FFA members. The majority of Harris FFA members were White and Debra did not change her accent for those FFA members. Thus, for Debra, the dominate ideology of accents centered on her perception of FFA as being rural and agrarian as well as White. The members' discussions concerning accents highlighted the complexity of the FFA's dominate ideology and the Harris members' ability to identify with that ideology. Many of the members were intrigued by the cultural differences they saw and heard. This intrigue was not always negative; however, they realized that they were different from many of the other FFA members at the convention.

## **Rural Symbols**

Many of the White Harris FFA members described the cultural barriers they encountered at the convention as more of a rural and urban dichotomy. The rural traditions seen at the convention became both overt and covert to the Harris FFA members. The long history of FFA in rural communities and emphasis on production agriculture was on display during the convention's opening session. The history and success of FFA are articulated and celebrated through rituals, like the FFA opening ceremony and speeches from leaders in the organization. The opening session features images and videos of rural settings and production agriculture on a jumbo screen. The overt rural overtones are hard to miss. The National FFA Officers are stationed next to agrarian artifacts like a plow or ear of corn (FFA, 2009). However, the plow and ear of corn are covert symbols of rural life. Harris FFA members participated in many of these rituals, including the recitation of the FFA members' part of the FFA Opening Session, which starts with the presiding officer asking, "FFA members, why are we?"

The FFA jacket also represents a covert part of FFA ideology. The jacket has been relevantly unchanged for over 80 years. The more decorated the jacket, the more covert the meaning and the more disconnect perceived between urban and rule students. The jacket has a larger FFA emblem patch on the reverse and a small patch on the front with the same emblem. The jacket also includes the FFA members' home chapter and home state embroidered on the reverse. Many FFA members also had their name embroidered on the front of their jacket. Some FFA members did not have their name on their jackets for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, many FFA members displayed their prominent FFA awards (pins commemorating their achievement) on their jackets below their embroidered name (FFA, 2009). Thus, FFA members displayed their achievements in FFA through their jackets. The Harris FFA members had neither

their names embroidered nor awards attached to the FFA jackets they wore. Some of the Harris FFA members talked about the FFA jackets they wore during a focus group.

Moderator: Still they have a name on their jacket. Does that mean something to you guys not having a name on your jacket?

Ruth: To me it doesn't.

Moderator: You see somebody with all those pins [FFA awards displayed on someone's jacket], right. Does it get intimidating?

Savannah: I feel like we haven't; we're city people.

Ruth: We've only been in this program for two years.

Savannah: They've been in it all their life.

Mary: These kids have been doing it longer than we have or at least they have more social clubs.

Savannah: Since elementary and stuff.

Ruth: We're city kids and it's just like they're doing so much.

Mary: They have more experience with farming, doing competitions and when we do it, it's our first time and we can't go out and look at something because we don't have it.

Savannah: Yes. I also feel like I think maybe their school or maybe their population gives more support to the FFA, but when I was first a freshman in this school I had never even heard of FFA until my junior year.

These Harris FFA members were able to connect the FFA jackets they saw at the convention to the traditional agriculture and rural opportunities of FFA and their own urban community's lack of those same opportunities.

Lisa realized that FFA was an organization set predominately in rural areas. She realized the traditions of FFA were entrenched in many of the rural members she met at the convention. "It's been going for 85 years and if you have been doing this about ten years or so, from elementary on up, then you know where to go and what to do and what's next...." Experiencing the FFA from elementary on up was not an option for the Harris FFA members. They could only be in FFA for two years because their agriculture program was just a two-year program. Many of the experiences that FFA members were talking about on stage were unattainable to them because of this time limitation. They could never obtain their State FFA Degree because that required three years of agriculture courses, which also precluded them from obtaining their American FFA Degree. Thus, they faced multiple barriers to fulfilling an "idealized" FFA experience, mainly restricted by context and time.

The rural and production agriculture themes did force members to connect their context to the ideology on display at the convention. Tasha's perspective focused on the practice of agriculture. "I think smaller towns and the country are more involved because if you live in a big city you don't really pay attention to what you can do for other people and agriculture." The combination of rural agricultural practices and the FFA traditions in rural America formed a cultural barrier for the Harris FFA members. These differences required even the Harris FFA members to think about how they could overcome the rural-urban divide.

### **Assimilating into FFA**

The Harris FFA members worked to assimilate themselves into the dominate culture they experienced at the convention. Their efforts to assimilate included members participating in overt symbolic activities, like members reciting parts of the FFA opening ceremonies. Some of the covert symbols of FFA caused concern for members, like the status of their FFA jacket. Nonetheless, all of the Harris FFA members claimed to feel more like FFA members than before they had gone to convention. The degree of their new connection to FFA varied according to their own context. For instance, José said, "Yeah, when people talk about the farm and rolling up

hay, I just can't relate to that." Every student had to wrestle with barriers like race and culture. The ideology of FFA as a whole was not easily transferable to their lives.

Nonetheless, the Harris FFA members strove to find ways around these barriers. They did this by picking apart the ideology of FFA and finding ideas to which they could relate. Some members found a connection to FFA because they had learned about the importance of agriculture in America. This was a very overt message during the FFA Opening Session. Debra said, "I didn't think agriculture was that important, but then I realized it is really important." José replied similarly, "Like, the opening sessions, we had that talk about how much farmers feed people and [how] the amount of people who would've [been] farming have decreased over the years." The importance of agriculture to America was a concept Harris FFA members could understand and agree with. Furthermore, the message and image of FFA members working to fight hunger in their community gave them a direct link to agriculture, FFA, and their own community. This higher cause was appealing to them.

The mission of providing food for America, another overt message during the FFA opening session, was also a large enough cause to get some of the Harris FFA chapter members to look over the cultural barriers they perceived in FFA. The cause of helping the hungry enabled the members to think about the leadership and community development aspects of the FFA. Janet said, "I definitely know that I belong in the FFA... I like to help other people." Martha connected with the speaker during the opening session of convention that was homeless and food insecure. She said, "[I liked] How they help the girl from the South that was homeless and how they feed the hungry... We could actually go and help when people go help feed the homeless." Almost all of the members echoed these sentiments. Thus, the Harris FFA members were willing to overcome both overt and covert cultural differences; yet, they did not identify with every portion of FFA. The members actively sought and tried to make sense of what FFA could mean to them and assimilate that information into the dominate ideology of FFA.

### **Discussion**

This research highlighted the difficulties the Harris FFA members had when interacting with the overt and covert ideologies of FFA. These include the predominance of White FFA members, FFA members' accents, and FFA jackets. The White members and perceived southern accents were part of the overt ideology at the convention. These were easy to see and hear. The FFA jacket was conceptualized by the urban FFA members as both overt and covert. The overt nature of the jackets is easy to see; however, the urban members recognized the significance of having your name and awards on a FFA jacket. This meaning is covert in nature. These ideologies presented some cultural challenges for the Harris FFA members. We do not want to overstate these ideological components and claim they are an impediment to Harris FFA members' FFA involvement. They worked through most of these issues and still found a cultural niche in the FFA. Nonetheless, these challenges should not be overlooked and can form a real barrier to urban FFA members feeling like actual FFA members and wanting to participate in FFA.

The Harris FFA members had the cultural resiliency to internalize the different ideological values they experienced at the National FFA Convention. They even personally connected with pieces of the overt messages presented at the convention. The Harris FFA members either overlooked or adapted to the rural, White, and traditional agriculture values of FFA which they witnessed (Lawrence et al., 2013; Martin & Kitchel, 2013; Phelps, Henry, & Bird, 2012); but more importantly, they focused on the leadership and community development values of the FFA. This cultural adaptation was spurred on by the Harris FFA members' belief in the need of American agriculture to feed people.

Thus, the hegemony of FFA was not a complete fit for the Harris FFA members, and these members had to apply the overt ideology of FFA to their urban context to get the most out of FFA participation. These results must be understood with an important caveat. These students wanted to go and were the most active members in their chapter. Nonetheless, even these active urban FFA members experienced cultural barriers at the convention.

The implications of this research seem to counter and at times reaffirm the established tenets of critical theory and youth organizations. The rural values of FFA can alienate urban members (Borden et al., 2005; Harvard Research Project, 2004). This has been the case for most Harris FFA members as they experience some level of disconnect and unease. Nonetheless, the Harris FFA members found ways that their values could fit in with the mission and motto of the FFA. They felt passionate about the desire to develop youth and serve communities (FFA, 2009). The predominantly White, rural members at the convention were noticed by the Harris FFA members and influenced the Harris FFA members to change how they acted. This finding aligns with previous research featuring youth in culturally diverse settings (Herrera & Arbretton, 2003; Kwon, 2006; Larson, 1994). The rural reality of the organization was not lost on the members. However, they did not suggest changing the status quo of FFA and were conscious of the history of FFA.

Instead of demanding change, the members were willing to make certain personal changes or overlook the predominance of White, rural members at the Convention to find a place in the FFA. This conclusion counters some previous notions about youth in organizations (Borden et al., 2005; Harvard Research Project, 2004; Herrera & Arbretton, 2003; Kwon, 2006). The eagerness of youth to belong to organizations they think are important may encourage them to overlook important cultural differences. We want to emphasize once more that these were the most active of the Harris FFA members and their views may not have represented the views of every Harris FFA member. Nonetheless, this implication has importance for people starting or researching urban FFA chapters as they may be able to leverage the leadership and community development aspects of FFA to encourage FFA member involvement. This implication is also important for researchers in the field of critical pedagogy as youth identity can be circumvented for larger social causes.

The recommendations that emerged from this study also build upon the arguments of critical theory (Apple, 1998; Kincheloe, 2008). Advocates of critical pedagogy would argue that diverse members need to have their culture addressed to ensure their participation and success in FFA. Some practical suggestions include FFA activities and events which focus exclusively on urban agriculture. Some of these urban activities or events could happen at the National FFA Convention, which would showcase urban agriculture and allow rural FFA members to experience some urban culture. The involvement of urban agriculture students in the FFA is important because participation in FFA can lead to many positive outcomes (Phipps et al., 2008) and a lack of diverse members may only reinforce the dominant ideologies present in FFA (Lobel, 1990).

FFA may be able to overcome cultural differences by providing more universally appealing messages about agriculture and civic agriculture at the convention. These could include more messages about the future of agriculture and how FFA members can have a role in that future. These messages need to have the voice of urban FFA members in mind. For instance, arguments about farmers needing to feed the world are important; however, urban members may feel like this is a role they cannot have because they may not conceptualize themselves as farmers. Demonstrating the role of how science and social groups will help feed the world as well as how local communities can provide safe and healthy food would help urban members find a connection.

We are not arguing that FFA convention planners or even FFA advisors should eliminate the emphasis on FFA history through rituals and activities. The past and future need to be woven together for every member. In the case of the Harris FFA members, the values of leadership and community development were central to their interest in the organization.

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