Perceived Social Distances of Rural High School Seniors Toward Multicultural Student Profiles

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Abstract

Social identity theory posits that people do not have one personal sense of identity, rather multiple identities based on group memberships. After four years of involvement in secondary agricultural (an elective set of courses for high school youth), the identity of seniors is molded by the environment surrounded them over their tenure. The purpose of this study was to identify the acceptance level high school seniors, throughout Kentucky, have toward multiple student profiles that reflect a diversity of social, racial, and sexual identities. Using a social distance scale, the results reveal that students were more accepting of a student who resides from a farm background and is heterosexual; however, results reveal a strong resistance against a student not from a farm background, Black, and gay to enroll in agriculture courses. Results reveal a level of implicitness that hinders the enrollment of students from cultures different from the social identity of the current group membership. Recommendations for inclusive programs that provide opportunities for secondary students to collaborate with culturally different individuals as well as the development of agricultural curriculum that encompasses a transformational approach to gaining cultural competence.

Keywords: social distancing; race; social identity; sexuality; secondary youth

Introduction

Intergroup relationships are a powerful tool in learning, team building and developing a culture for an agricultural education program. Unfortunately, intergroup relationships, developed at the secondary level, reflect a homogenous mindset that is limited in diversity and inclusive parameters as well as empathy (Cikara et al., 2014); however, researchers (Chatman et al., 2015) found that groups charged with a collectivistic task were more likely to complete the task at a higher level of creativity and accomplishment when the group consisted of diverse cultural nationalities. In addition, they discovered that heterogeneous groups who were prepared to be more individualistic were more likely to execute the task worse. These findings could be utilized within education to create interventions that teach collectivistic mindsets to overcome the effects of homophily and in-group mentality. Chang et al. (2003) found that racially diverse environments lead to both qualitative and quantitative gains as they stimulated creativity and speculation. Furthermore, Terenzini et al. (2001), found that racial/ethnic composition of a classroom aided the development of students' problem-solving and group skills; while Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) noticed an increase in social activism. The benefits of diversity and inclusion have been found to increase academic performance and creativity as well as allow students to develop a sense of belonging. Osterman (2000) found individual sense of belonging affects students' feelings about themselves and their ability to be accepted within an intergroup relationship influences their behavior and perceptions. Therefore, one could posit that the inclusion of diversity within the

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secondary agriculture classroom would provide students with more inclusive behaviors toward individuals who are not like themselves.

Cultural competence is increasingly being considered as an essential skill in the professional workplaces (Wood & Landry, 2008). This ability to integrate and transform knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings increases quality of service and produces better business outcomes (Davis, 1997). While there is a gap in research of "business case for diversity" regarding the impact it has on the bottom line (Coleman, 1995), the current research has focused on the potential for increased performance (Wood & Landry, 2008). Cultural diversity can provide businesses with diverse experiences and knowledge, which are beneficial qualities for companies with an orientation towards growth (Cox, 1994; McLeod et al, 1996; Priem et al., 1995). Furthermore, when inclusion is implemented by an organization, employees are more likely to feel valued and supported; therefore, tend to be more innovative (Eisenberger et al., 1990). Diversity and inclusion will need to find its place in the agricultural education classroom to continue to meet the changing skill and knowledge demands of the 21st century agriculture industry.

Theoretical Framework/Literature Review

Social identity theory was created by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. Social identity theory says people do not have one personal sense of identity, rather multiple identities based on group memberships. They also say that these salient groups provide a feeling of belonging. In efforts to increase self-image, people boost the significance of the group they belong to, otherwise known as in-group mentality. The research team also found that intergroup discrimination would occur in attempt to boost group importance (Turner et al., 1979). Members are able to enhance the status of their group by being more charitable and less envious of their fellow group members (Chen & Li, 2009). Charness et al. (2007) discovered that people naturally use their group membership as a compass to navigate social environments. Therefore, people will assume an identity that provides meaning and builds self-esteem (Vignoles et al., 2006). While social identity theory presents positive motivation, it also holds the potential to create groupthink or negative peer influence (Albert et al., 2013).

Ekmerkci and Casey (2009) found that a higher frequency of interaction within a group and the more information received about the group will cause a person to create a stronger identity within the group. The more salient the group becomes in the formation of a person's identity the more predictable their behavior becomes according to Griepentrog et al. (2012). They argue within their paper that the closer the organization's values align with their own helps predict whether they will join the group. Griepentrog et al. (2012) found that organizational identification, or defining yourself in terms of a particular organization, can occur before being formally brought into the group. Organizational identification is important in predicting whether the individual has intentions to pursue joining the organization or withdrawing from it (Griepentrog et al., 2012). Therefore, the more homophily found between the group and the individual combined with the frequency of interaction greatly impacts the group's amount of influence and consequently the individual's identity.

Social identity theory impacts how an individual looks at leadership and the relationship between a leader and employee. Chrobot-Mason et al. (2016) found that the stronger level of identification a person has with the company, the more likely they are to view fellow group members as leaders. Kalkhoff and Barnum (2000) found that when a person is looking for leadership, people within the group will always be more influential than a person outside the group. Next a high-status individual will be more influential than a low-status individual within the in-

group. While the term high and low status stems from status-organizing theory, the research team found it ran concurrently with social identity theory (Kalkhoff & Barnum, 2000). Hogg and Terry (2000) discuss that social identity and leadership within organization contexts when minorities were unlikely to attain positions of leadership because they are less likely to match the organizational prototypes or in-group requirements prescribed by the organization. These findings display the importance leadership has within an in-group. In-group leadership sets the tone and organizational prototypes the rest of the group will model. If leaders do not set an inclusive mentality within the group, or even worse, do not set an ethical administration within, the group will follow suit.

Social identity theory and in-group mentality have provided positive outcomes as well. Chattopadhyay et al. (2004) found that employees are more motivated to help a company that they feel a sense of belonging to. They do so through the creation of a model that explains both the positive and negative effects of group dissimilarity (Chattopadhyay et al., 2004). Van Knippenberg's (2000) posits that if social identity is important within a group then it is recognized that high work performance is in the best interest of the group. These findings explain how social identity can be used as a motivator to increase quality performance produced by students. Inclusivity of a group and a sense of belonging is a powerful influence for individuals to perform.

From social identity development comes power, and social power formulates distancing (Magee & Smith, 2013). As social groups are formed and power is gained, articulated predictions are made about how the social dynamic leads to social comparison, susceptibility to influence, responses to one's ability to think and emotions (2013). Since the horrid attacks of 9/11, social distancing has increased toward all ethnic groups, but more so toward Arabic Americans (Parillo & Donoghue, 2013). After conducting a 20-year longitudinal study, Smith et al. (2014), found that increasing social distancing was occurring among groups identified by their educational level, religious homophily, race and age. The authors warned that youth are increasingly isolated from diverse audiences and if continued, communities would see demographic heterogeneity, institutional segregation, economic inequality, and symbolic boundaries.

When examining the role social identity, diversity, and intergroup relationships have on adolescents, Knifsend and Juvonen (2013) looked at the complexity of social identity among 600+ middle school students who were involved in extra-curricular activities. They determined that when students were involved in activities where cross-ethnic friendships occurred, attitudes toward ethnic intergroup relationships were positive. Awareness and relationships among culturally diverse youth, have a positive effect on cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. Educational programs and social environments where STEM awareness was a major focus changed the perceptions female youth had in identifying themselves in STEM and overcoming the challenges and stereotypes associated with being a female in said field (Kim et al., 2018). Secondary agricultural education has an identity that is based upon a variety of factors such as environmental, historical, and cultural (citation). Russell (2016), examined 1,419 secondary, non-agricultural education students on their perception of enrolling in agriculture at the secondary level. Within her findings, Russell discovered that the majority of the participants believed that they did not feel that they would be accepted in an agriculture courses and that their friends do not recommend they enroll in the courses. If social identification stems from the categorization of individuals (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and social identity reflects attitudes and perceptions to create groupthink (Albert et al., 2013), then how accepting or distancing are secondary agriculture students toward underrepresented populations and social cliques that are not reflective of their own?

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the inclusiveness of secondary agriculture students towards students of race (Black or White), sexuality (Heterosexual or Homosexual), and clique (Non-Farm Background and Traditional Farm Background) and to determine whether social distancing occurs within the mindsets of secondary agriculture youth.

The following research objectives were developed to be the focus:
RO1: Describe the breaking point in each social distance scale of the 8 Mock Student Profiles
RO2: Determine the rank of acceptance/tolerance by student profiles based upon Social Distance Scale means.
RO3: Determine the relationship of demographic variables to the identified breaking point from each student profile.

Methodology

The methodology of the research was based off of the transformative epistemology. Transformative epistemologies believe that research needs to address social oppression and the imbalance of power that results from it (Creswell, 2014). Transformative epistemologies traditionally address empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and/or alienation as the focal point of the study (2014). After receiving an "exemption certification" from the Institutional Review Board for protocol number 17-0579-P4S, data were collected.

Research Design

Social distance referred to as people's willingness to participate in social contacts for varying degrees of closeness with members of diverse social groups (Wark & Gilliher, 2007). One main concept of Social Distance Scales that was used within the study was the concept that an individual would "go just so far" in letting a person of another group near him or her, but would go no further, otherwise known as a *breaking point* (Newcomb et al., 1965). How "far" the participants will let a person get in relation to themselves can be illustrated by the term *degrees of closeness*. The breaking point can be calculated by having a participant evaluate how close they would let a hypothetical person near him or her on varying degrees of closeness. The researcher will be referencing seniors enrolled in secondary agriculture classes throughout a state and their willingness to include or distance themselves from students of diverse groups (i.e. allowing a student of a diverse group into their school versus sharing a room with the student on an FFA trip). The breaking point is the degree of closeness where the participant no longer feels comfortable with the Mock Student Profile (MSP). Once a breaking point occurs, the general population begins to follow suit on their degrees of closeness (Svensson et al., 2015)

Population and Sample

The population consisted of seniors enrolled in secondary agriculture throughout [STATE] during the fall semester of 2017 (N = 2,766). Seniors were purposefully selected because they are considered the face of four-year programs as they reflect the philosophies set-forth by the leaders before them (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2008). A recruitment letter was sent out to all 140 secondary agriculture programs, requesting the participation of all 2,766 seniors within each program through a provided school log-in and survey link with a designated time to complete. Of the identified seniors, 417 agreed to participate from 47 secondary agriculture programs. The programs resided throughout the state rather a particular region; particularly a minimum of three schools from each

of the 11 designated regions. After removal of incomplete questionnaires due to the lack of consent, a remaining 399 responses deemed usable.

Of the 399 senior participants, the majority of the participants had never obtained an officer position within their FFA chapter nor served in a leadership role within other clubs and/or sports. Similarly, the participants were primarily White, rural, had never traveled abroad and identified themselves as Christian. When asked, the majority of the students reported that the highest accomplished educational level of at least one parent was a high school diploma and perceive to have a family household income between $50,000-$74,999. Overall, the youth participants reflected the overall demographics of [STATE] (US Census Bureau, 2019).

Once a participating senior obtained a direct link and connected to the questionnaire, a method of stratified sampling was utilized regarding the profiles being completed. Researchers generally want to obtain an overall estimation through inexpensive means (StatPac, 2014; Jackson, 2011); therefore, an online approach was selected versus face-to-face. In order to maximize response rate, teachers were provided weekly email reminders for the six-week duration of project's data collection. Furthermore, the researcher followed the data collection techniques of sending reminders to non-responders set by Dillman et al. (2014) to improve response rate.

Instrumentation

An internet-based questionnaire was used for the benefits of user-friendliness, timeliness in reaching the participant, elimination of mailing expenses, decreases human error in entering data, and reduces time spent on coding responses (Roztocki, 2001). The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section included student consent.

The second section included social distance scales. The social distance scale was created by Emory Bogardus in 1924 (Bogardus, 1928; Faris, 1967). The social distance scale is an attitude scale used to measure prejudice. It is also an example of a Guttman scale in that it is unidimensional and cumulative (Wark & Galliher, 2007). Social distance scales traditionally use five to seven statements that prompt progressively more or less intimacy toward the group or person considered (2007). Eight mock student profiles were developed based off three bi-variate variables; Race (African-American and Caucasian), Sexuality (Heterosexual and Homosexual), and Social Subgroup (Ag kid with a farm background and athletic, not from a farm background). Two social subgroups were developed based on a previous questionnaire designed to solicit various social groups present in [STATE] high schools that were the opposite of a traditional farm background. Various social groups identified were "band kid", "jock", and "academic team kid", but the most prevalent social group reported was "athlete". Based on this information, the decision was made to include athlete, non-farm background as the opposite social group to traditional farm background for the mock student profile development. The researchers recognize that some students from a traditional farm background also may self-identify as athletes, but for the purpose of the study, it became important to create a visual within the mock student profile for purposeful decision making by participants related to the homophily scale. In order that all cultures were equally explored, the student profiles were separated into all possible existing options (see Table 1). Because students were stratified randomly by the online questionnaire, participating seniors only received 2 of 8 Mock Student Profiles.

Table 1
Mock Student Profile Narratives (*n* = 8)

Mock Student Profiles	Description
MSP 1	Student 1 is an FFA member who has transferred to your school from another high school. They consider themselves to be an Ag kid with a farm background, White, and straight.
MSP 2	Student 2 is an FFA member who has transferred to your school from another high school. They consider themselves to be athletic, not from a farm background, White, and straight.
MSP 3	Student 3 is an FFA member who has transferred to your school from another high school. They consider themselves to be an Ag kid, from a farm background, White, and gay.
MSP 4	Student 4 is an FFA member who has transferred to your school from another high school. They consider themselves to be athletic, not from a farm background, White, and gay.
MSP 5	Student 5 is an FFA member who has transferred to your school from another high school. They consider themselves to be an Ag kid from a farm background, Black, and straight.
MSP 6	Student 6 is an FFA member who has transferred to your school from another high school. They consider themselves to be athletic, not from a farm background, Black, and straight.
MSP 7	Student 7 is an FFA member who has transferred to your school from another high school. They consider themselves to be an Ag kid from a farm background, Black, and gay.
MSP 8	Student 8 is an FFA member who has transferred to your school from another high school. They consider themselves to be athletic, not from a farm background, Black, and gay.

Note: FFA is a youth organization that is affiliated with secondary agriculture courses

Participants were able to manipulate the social distance section to express the degree of closeness, or the distance they were willing to include the mock student into their own life. The variables of social distance were: a) accept this student as a member in my school; b) accept this student as a student enrolled in my Agriculture class; c) accept this student as a member of my FFA chapter; d) accept this student as a member of the same FFA competitive team as me; e) accept this student as my FFA chapter President; and f) accept this student as my roommate on trips. The degrees of closeness range included a five-point scale where a "1" represented Strongly Disagree and "5" represented Strongly Agree. The final section of the questionnaire requested characteristic information, such as leadership positions, international travel, parental education, favorite genre of music, practicing religion, parental income, number of people in household, rural, suburban, or urban home residence, and race/ethnicity.

Validity and Reliability

To establish validity, a review process of a panel, consisting of experts in the field of inclusion and diversity as well as youth of similar backgrounds and ages, was established. All panel experts received documents containing the research purpose, objectives, and copies of the questionnaires. The members were asked to examine clarity, verbiage, understanding of phrases and visual appearance. Modifications were made following the expert panel's reviews to improve the age appropriateness of the questionnaire. To establish construct validity, the multitrait-

multimethod matrix (Campbell & Fiske, 1959) was implemented. After assessing the six major considerations for construct validity, the scale reached critical value deeming it to be valid.

Reliability of the Social Distance scales were tested via test-retest over the course of two months for each Mock Student Profile. A pilot group of college freshman who were, the year prior, a senior in a secondary agriculture program reflected the demographic of the participants. Mock Student Profile 1 received an $r > .906$. Mock Student Profile 2 received an $r > .832$. Mock Student Profile 3 received an $r > .819$. Mock Student Profile 4 received an $r > .857$. Mock Student Profile 5 received an $r > .810$. Mock Student Profile 6 received an $r > .899$. Mock Student Profile 7 received an $r > .842$. Finally, Mock Student Profile 8 received an $r > .852$. According to Santos (1999), a Pearson correlations score on a test/re-test greater than 0.70 is considered reliable.

Data Collection

A recruitment letter was sent via email listserv to the 140 teachers affiliated to teaching agriculture at the high school level. The agricultural educators distributed the questionnaire link to the senior members to increase response rate and minimize non-response error. Teachers were requested to provide time for students to complete the questionnaire from any electronic device that had connection to the internet as the questionnaire was designed for compatibility on a computer, tablet, and smartphone. Email reminders were sent three times over the course of six weeks. Response error was determined by comparing responses received from the first invitation to the responses completed after the last reminder was evaluated and no significant difference was determined. After the closure of the survey, answers were kept on a secure, online statistical analysis website.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire, in its entirety, was created in Qualtrics and then transferred over to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences® [SPSS] 24. Frequencies and percentages were collected to describe the depth of inclusion at each degree of closeness for each Mock Student Profile, as reported by the five anchors presented. To determine the breaking point of inclusion for the social distance scales the number of nonresponses to each degree of closeness was calculated. A study conducted by Tourangeau and Yan (2007) found that respondents are less likely to answer questions that are sensitive and make them uncomfortable. Tourangeau et al. (2000) defined the term *sensitivity questions*, as questions closely related to the traditional concept of social desirability, to which a question elicits answers that are socially unacceptable or socially undesirable

The researchers based the breaking point calculations off Tourangeau and Yan's (2007) findings that to determine a breaking in degrees of closeness for the population, sensitive questions reflect a nonresponse rate that begins at 3%. Therefore, the research team calculated the breaking point for each mock profile when the nonresponse was above 3%. For the remaining objectives, the researchers utilized measurements of central tendencies and linear regression.

Findings/Results

Research objective one sought to determine the breaking point within the social distance scale by each Mock Student Profile (MSP). Breaking points were set at when a degree of closeness received a 3% nonresponse, as set by Tourangeua and Yan (2007). Based upon the findings, as provided in Table 2, no identified breaking point was determined for MSP 1 (Farm, White, Straight) and MSP 5 (Farm, Black, Straight). Mock Student Profile 2 (Athlete/Non-Farm, White, Straight),

MSP 6 (Athlete/Non-Farm, Black, Straight), and MSP 7 (Farm, Black, Gay) identified a breaking point of acceptance at the 5th degree of closeness, *I would accept this student as my FFA chapter president.* The senior participants identified the 3rd degree of closeness, *I would accept this student as a member of my FFA chapter* as the breaking point for MSP 4 (Athlete/Non-Farm, White, Gay). Finally, MSP 3 (Farm, White, Gay) and MSP 8 (Athlete/Non-Farm, Black, Gay) had the earliest breaking point at the 2nd degree of closeness, *I would accept this student as a student in my Ag class.*

Table 2
Frequencies of Non-Response on Social Distance Scales by Student Profile (n = 399)

Degrees of Closeness *I would accept…*	MSP 1 (*n*=103)	MSP 2 (*n*=80)	MSP 3 (*n*=88)	MSP 4 (*n*=94)	MSP 5 (*n*=87)	MSP 6 (*n*=90)	MSP 7 (*n*=72)	MSP 8 (*n*=83)
…this student as a member of my school.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.4%)
…this student as a student in my Ag class	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.3%)	3 (3.4%)	2 (2.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (4.8%)
…this students as a member of my FFA chapter	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.5%)	4 (4.5%)	3 (3.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (6.0%)
…this student as a member of the same FFA competitive team as me	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (6.8%)	7 (7.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.2%)	1 (1.4%)	6 (7.2%)
…this student as my FFA chapter president	0 (0.0%)	3 (3.8%)	10 (11.4%)	9 (9.6%)	2 (2.3%)	3 (3.3%)	3 (4.2%)	9 (10.8%)
…this student as my roommate on trips	1 (1.0%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (14.8%)	14 (14.9%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (4.4%)	10 (13.9%)	13 (15.7%)

Research objective two sought to rank the acceptance/tolerance level of the senior participants perceptions of each Mock Student Profile on the social distance scale. Before a rank could be provided, measures of central tendencies were obtained for each MSP by degrees of closeness (see Table 3). Then an overall mean for the Mock Student Profile was determined by the average of each degree of closeness. From each Mock Student Profile, it appears, as determined by Wark & Gilliher (2007), that the mean steadily decreases as it gravitates through the degrees of closeness.

Table 3
Mean Social Distance Score by Mock Student Profile (*n* = 399)

	Mean/SD					
	I would accept as a member of my school	I would accept as a student enrolled in my Ag class	I would accept as a member of my FFA chapter	I would accept as a member of the same competitive team as me	I would accept as our FFA chapter President	I would accept as my roommate on trips
MSP 1	4.65/.79	4.63/.78	4.63/.77	4.52/.87	4.27/1.05	4.39/1.05
MSP 2	4.43/.95	4.31/.94	4.29/1.09	4.20/1.16	3.59/1.49	4.05/1.15
MSP 3	3.98/1.28	4.15/1.12	4.04/1.25	3.92/1.19	3.53/1.47	3.57/1.43
MSP 4	3.95/1.47	3.89/1.45	3.74/1.51	3.65/1.49	3.27/1.60	3.42/1.69
MSP 5	4.62/.74	4.65/.72	4.62/.91	4.59/.78	4.40/1.05	4.36/1.01
MSP 6	4.64/.75	4.54/.90	4.48/.96	4.47/.95	3.87/1.42	4.29/1.29
MSP 7	4.41/1.06	4.34/1.15	4.34/1.15	4.14/1.37	4.02/1.34	3.38/1.57
MSP 8	3.92/1.36	3.83/1.31	3.80/1.35	3.68/1.41	3.29/1.51	3.20/1.60

Once an overall mean was determined from the degrees of closeness on each Mock Student Profile, a ranking could be ascertained. The ranking provides insight to a preferred acceptance/tolerance, as determined by the senior participants. Based upon the overall mean in Table 4, MSP 5 (Farm, Black, Straight) had the highest ranked mean (*m* = 4.54) on the social distance scale, followed by MSP 1 (Farm, White, Straight), MSP 6 (Athlete/Non-Farm, Black, Straight and MSP 2 (Athlete/Non-Farm, White, Straight). Mock Student Profile 8 (Athlete/Non-Farm, Black, Gay) received the lowest ranked mean (*m* = 3.63) on the social distance scale.

Table 4
Ranking Social Distance of the Mock Student Profiles by High School Seniors (*n* = 399)

	Mean	Ranking
MSP 5 – Ag kid from a farm background, Black, and straight	4.54	1
MSP 1 – Ag kid with a farm background, White, and straight	4.52	2
MSP 6 – Athletic, not from a farm background, Black, and straight	4.39	3
MSP 2 – Athletic, not from a farm background, White, and straight	4.15	4
MSP 7 – Ag kid, from a farm background, Black, and gay	4.11	5
MSP 3 – Ag kid from a farm background, White, and gay	3.87	6
MSP 4 – Athletic, not from a farm background, White, and gay	3.66	7
MSP 8 – Athletic, not from a farm background, Black and gay	3.63	8

To solve for research objective three, which sought to determine a relationship of degree of closeness breaking point for each Mock Student Profile by the provided demographics of the seniors participants, a regression was ran for each MSP. Significance was set at the *a* ≤ .05. Based upon Mock Student Profile 1 not having a breaking point, a regression was not analyzed. Significance in determining a demographic relationship to the breaking point was found in MSP 7 (Farm, Black, Gay) and MSP 8 (Athlete/Non-Farm, Black, Gay).

Based upon Mock Student Profile 7's breaking point, significance was determined that students who were not an FFA officer predicted a portion of the variance of social distance (β = .85; *p* = .00) within the fifth degree of closeness. Mock Student Profile 8's breaking point was the second degree of closeness. Students who were/are FFA Officers, from lower household income

levels and reside in rural residence predict a portion of the variance of the social distance at the second degree of closeness.

Table 5

Analysis for Social Distance Towards Mock Student Profile by the Breaking Point in Degree of Closeness

Demographic	MSP 1 NO BP	MSP 2 BP5	MSP 3 BP2	MSP 4 BP3	MSP 5 NO BP	MSP 6 BP5	MSP 7 BP5	MSP 8 BP2
				$\beta(p)$				
FFA Officer	NA	.17 (.42)	.18 (.59)	-.30 (.32)	NA	.03 (.87)	.85 (.00)*	-.95 (.01)*
Team Captain	NA	.21 (.35)	.27 (.41)	-.08 (.80)	NA	-.01 (.98)	-.04 (.86)	.07 (.85)
Traveled Abroad	NA	-.16 (.45)	.33 (.32)	-.49 (.10)	NA	.04 (.84)	-.05 (.83)	-.16 (.66)
Parents' Ed Level	NA	-.07 (.76)	.32 (.32)	.26 (.38)	NA	-.12 (.49)	.02 (.92)	.45 (.23)
Household Earned Income	NA	-.27 (.23)	.32 (.33)	.16 (.61)	NA	-.13 (.45)	.05 (.85)	.88 (.02)*
Home Residence	NA	.04 (.86)	.08 (.81)	.11 (.72)	NA	.11 (.54)	.12 (.62)	.99 (.01)*
Race	NA	.08 (.71)	-.10 (.78)	.09 (.74)	NA	-.10 (.56)	-.24 (.31)	-.44 (.24)

Note. MSP7 R^2 = 0.190 [F (6, 110) = 12.35, *p*-value < .02]; MSP8 R^2 = 0.271 [F (7, 88) = 14.77, *p*-value < .01]

Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

This study begins a necessary conversation regarding the relationship between social distancing and likeness and the potential effects on the culture of secondary agricultural education youth. Within the Commonwealth of Kentucky, where this study was conducted, the vast majority of students enrolled in secondary agricultural education are white and live in a rural/suburban community. The methodologies conducted in the study have limitations; thus generalizability is limited to populations similar to that of the four-year senior participants. To assist with participant fatigue, the researchers limited the students to only two randomized profiles, rather all eight. On average, each profile had 100 responses. The profile of Ag kid with farm background, White, and straight had the highest completion rate of over 98% while only 83% of the students completed the questionnaire for the profile of athletic, not from a farm background, Black and gay. Additional studies that can mirror what was established here can assist in strengthening the context regarding the cultural mindset and comfortability of the youth teachers are educating.

Social identity theory posits that people do not have one personal sense of identity, rather multiple identities based on group memberships (Turner et al., 1979). In addition, these salient groups provide a feeling of belonging. In efforts to increase self-image, people boost the significance of the group they belong to, otherwise known as in-group mentality. Within the context of this study, it would appear that the seniors reflect a larger picture of intergroup discrimination occurring in attempt to boost group importance. When examining the participants' demographics, over 70% identified themselves as rural, White and Christian. The remaining of the participant demographics (parental educational level, family household income, involvement in school) seem to vary. Overall, the demographics of the participants, in regards to race, religious affiliation, and

home residence, reflect that of secondary agricultural education throughout the Commonwealth; thus, it is plausible the results mirror a mindset for a much larger population.

Based upon a degree of closeness, set by Tourangeua and Yan (2007), it can be concluded that the senior participants were most accepting of students that reside from a farm background, no matter the racial composition of the student profile. Agricultural education is deeply rooted in production agriculture, so it is not a surprise that no breaking point in the comfortability of each degree of closeness occurred. Similarly, Tajfel et al. (1971) found that the subjects within their experiment mostly favored individuals with similar backgrounds in the distribution of rewards. The acceptance of students from farm backgrounds provides some positive contexts for the profession as the students in our secondary programs can assist a variety of students (i.e. new students in the school, students with disciplinary issues, etc.) if the students are reflective of the in-group's culture.

With the exception of having the student serve as the club President, the same acceptance can be inferred regarding students who identify with a social class of "Athlete/Non-Farm background. The racial background of the student had no indication to the seniors' degree of closeness. The researchers found it interesting that the social distance scale, although considered highly reliable (Santos, 1999), did not follow the suit of degrees of closeness for the Mock Student Profiles of straight athletes that do not reside on a farm. Within the findings, students were comfortable with the student profile as their roommate, but do not believe they are worthy of serving as the chapter president. Students who reflect similar backgrounds are accepted within the school, agricultural classes, club and competitive events, but should not consider themselves for the perceived highest leadership position. Again, social identity theory concurs as Tajfel and Turner (1979) found that group and team dynamics provide an inclusive mindset for individuals with similar cultural backgrounds, but prefer the backgrounds most like them to serve in leadership roles. In order to overcome such mentalities, the academic leader must assist the young minds in separating what is valuable in the group identity and assist them in the value of individual and group identities and how diverse identities further strengthen the dynamic of the team (Garcia Martinez et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, the sexuality of the Mock Student Profile played a critical role in the seniors identified degrees of closeness. In MSP 3 and MSP 8, both of which had a sexual identity of gay, the seniors expressed a breaking point in their degrees of closeness when asked if they were okay with the student enrolling in the same agriculture course as them. To assist in developing a more welcoming environment to students who enter a school and/or secondary agriculture classroom, it is recommended, based upon the results of De Pedro et al. (2018) that LGBTQ support groups and peer and teacher interventions be created. Each are associated with creating higher levels of safety and acceptance among LGBTQ youth in rural schools. Simple steps, such as the completion of *Safe Space* training and certifying members as Safe Zone team member helps in establishing a positive support system, while also developing a more inclusive student program toward students of different sexualities.

As an approach to better understand the social distance established by the seniors, a ranking, derived from the mean of each mock student profiles' degree of closeness was implemented. Based upon the ranking, a defining line emerged into what the students were most comfortable with as all four Mock Student Profiles that were identified with a *straight* identity outscored the Mock Student Profiles that were identified as *gay*. These results seem to reflect a common theme in secondary schools regarding the homophobia among teenagers (Pascoe, 2012).

Mock Student profiles 1 and 5 did not obtain a breaking point within the degrees of closeness; however, the other six profiles did. In order to identify a relationship between the

demographics collected and the breaking points, linear regressions were utilized. Only MSP 7 and 8 were determined to have significance in predicting a portion of the variance. Both Mock Student Profiles reflected cultural identities of Black and gay; however, they were different regarding their social culture of farm or athlete/non-farm. Based upon the regression models, students who were an officer of the youth organization are more apt to provide a lower degree of closeness than the members who were not officers toward MSP 8. It is unfortunate that youth leadership are less accepting of diverse students; however, the lack of acceptance further confirms the social identity of the seniors' group dynamic. Considering the seniors resided from every region within the state and reflect demographics that mirror that of the state, it is posited that these attitudes reflect the youth throughout secondary agricultural education programs.

Brown (2018) was concerned that the current youth generation are subconsciously establishing a segregated community of friends within their school as a gap in socio-economic status continues to broaden. Within this study, the opposite is true as students provided a higher degrees of closeness if they perceive to have a higher family's household income. Coincidentally seniors from an urban community provided higher degrees of closeness than seniors from rural communities.

Establishing an inclusive cultures within public schools is not an easy task, nor can it be accomplished quickly. Individual mindsets are shaped by the environment and groups that they are associated with (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and these mindsets are difficult to amend. Throughout society, professional developments are provided to assist educators in gaining skills within the context of culturally relevant pedagogy; however, little results have spurred from such training. As a result, it is recommended that teachers find curricular methods that engages youth in conversations about these sensitive topics. The researchers are not recommending that teachers disengage from the necessary content requirements set forth by their school and community, rather find ways to reform the curriculum to reflect multicultural education. Banks (1996), developed five approaches for multicultural education reform within the regular content delivery. It is recommended that classroom instruction seek methods that reach the fourth dimension, *content transformation,* and fifth dimension *social and civic action*.

Interventions can be as simple as using inclusive teaching methods or as complex as using multicultural education curriculum within the classroom. Research by Google found the most important factor of contributing to innovation by teams was "psychological safety" or the sense of confidence that a member's contributions will be valued and not embarrassed or rejected (Duhigg, 2016). Designing classroom procedures that promote crossing the homophilous lines and ensures student respect and empathy can be as simple as being cognizant when grouping students and fostering relationships across social groups.

Environmental factors, such as family, friends (Smith et al., 2014), youth organizations (Charness et al., 2007), faith (Sullivan & Wodarski, 2008), and financial background can have an effect on the development of social identity and willingness to reciprocal distance from someone who may be different. The focus of this study did not explore the role environmental conditions may have had on the responses by the participants; thus, the authors cannot posit such a relationship. However, it is recommended that the profession continue to expand upon the scholarship of reciprocal and social distancing within group cultures (Trepagnier, 2001) and work with sociologists to determine if a relationship exists for the betterment of our rural secondary schools and agriculture programs.

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