



“Because We Care”: Youth Worker Identity and Persistence in Precarious Work

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“Because We Care”: Youth Worker Identity and Persistence in Precarious Work

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Abstract

Youth workers are vital educators, mentors, and caregivers for adolescents. Researchers agree that caring relationships between youth workers and young people are the “critical ingredient” of community-based programs with beneficial outcomes for youth (Rhodes, 2004). However, it is common for practitioners to exit from organizations or the career altogether after just a few years (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). While previous research has considered the various reasons for these exits, limited scholarship has explored the underlying motivations and circumstances of youth workers who stay in the field.

To address this empirical lacuna, my dissertation examines the trajectories of “persisters” — those who continue in youth work despite known barriers. To understand the occupational identities and commitments of persisters, I utilized narrative inquiry, which entailed conducting life-story interviews with 20 practitioners with five or more years of experience. In my analysis, I found that persisters understood their work as a community calling. Intrinsic motivations fueled their persistence and shaped “boundaryless” constructions of their career identities across dimensions of time, engagement, and expertise (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Youth workers’ explanations of identity and persistence also uncovered cultural and structural challenges that worked against it. Extrinsic factors, such as gentrification and student loan debt, created new barriers to persistence. This led practitioners to employ a variety of individual coping strategies, including taking on additional jobs and relying on family finances, to stay in youth work. Thus, persistence often came at a personal cost. Youth workers eventually renegotiated their “boundaryless” identities to

either avoid burnout or consider transitions to related fields. While extrinsic supports helped cultivate an occupational identity, organizational and professional supports did not ensure persistence. In illuminating the relationship between occupational identity and persistence in youth work, this study also reveals the social inequities between those who can afford to stay and those who cannot. I consider the implications of the nonprofit sectors' reliance on persisters' callings and individual coping strategies. Ultimately, I argue that policymakers and organizational leaders must address the working conditions and concerns of youth workers rather than play a complicit role in perpetuating the undervaluation and precarity of care-based work.

Introduction

Youth workers are vital educators, mentors, and caregivers for adolescents in the United States. These adults work in a variety of community-based settings, creating programs, developing activities, and advocating for resources, oftentimes in support of youth who are marginalized in U.S. schools and society (Halpern, 2000; Hirsch, 2005; Baldrige, 2014; Ginwright, 2015; Intrator & Siegel, 2014). Researchers agree that the positive relationships between young people and these caring adults are the “critical ingredient” and “secret sauce” of programs with a range of beneficial youth outcomes (Hirsch, 2005, Jones & Deutsch, 2011; McLaughlin, 2000, 2018; Rhodes, 2004). However, while long-term mentorship is considered essential within youth programs, occupational persistence in youth work is not the norm (Wisman, 2011; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Organizational staff turnover and career exits have been a consistent issue in the field over the past few decades (Borden, 2002; Halpern, 1999, 2002; Wisman, 2011).

There are several reasons for organizational turnover and career exits in youth work. Youth workers and scholars alike have discussed the low status and societal value conferred on the profession, particularly given its focus on the care and development of children and youth during out-of-school hours (Borden, 2002; Borden, Garza, & Stone, 2004; Fusco, 2012). Exits from the field have also been influenced by “extrinsic factors,” such as low pay, limited mentorship and on-site support, and few opportunities for recognition or advancement (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Direct service youth work is oftentimes a precarious form of employment (Kalleberg, 2009), with many practitioners working part-time and hourly wage positions

that are contingent on grants or government funding. Researchers have speculated that the age gap found in demographic data of youth workers is representative of the people who have left the field in their thirties when they start having families (Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006). Recent research has illuminated how neoliberal pressures — i.e., privatization in the public sector — have influenced youth organizations from prioritizing relationship-oriented and culturally responsive work to more individualistic and paternalistic programming (Baldrige, 2014; Fusco, Lawrence, Matloff-Nieves, & Ramos, 2013; McLaughlin, 2018). These pressures also influence staff decisions about their commitments to organizations, oftentimes resulting in high rates of turnover (Baldrige, forthcoming, McLaughlin, 2018).

Although the challenges causing youth workers to experience job instability or to exit the field altogether are well documented (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006), we know far less about the identities and trajectories of youth workers who stay in the field, those whom I call the “persisters.” Past scholarship has illuminated the beliefs, practices, and willful dedication of community-based youth workers (Baldrige, 2014; Hirsch, 2005; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Ross, 2013; Starr, 2003; Watson, 2012). Without claiming generalizable findings, two national studies revealed a stunning diversity among youth workers along multiple demographic dimensions (National Afterschool Association, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006). Importantly, the majority of survey respondents reported anomalously high levels of self-reported work satisfaction (in comparison to other occupations), and expressed a desire to work with children and youth for five or more years, regardless of full time or part time employment (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). According to researchers Nicole Yohalem and Karen Pittman (2006), this

seemingly contradictory pair of findings — strong commitments and high turnover — indicates that the purported workforce dilemma “may be less about finding quality workers and more about creating quality jobs” (p. 6).

The prevailing response to issues of retention and turnover from policymakers and researchers has focused on field-building efforts (e.g. developing trainings, common standards, credentialing systems, etc.) to sustain, stabilize, and lift the social status of the profession (see Emslie, 2013; Freeman, 2002; Fusco, 2012; National Afterschool Association, 2012; Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009). The underlying assumption of these efforts is that by carving out expertise along with clear pathways, youth workers can claim a professional identity that would encourage higher standards for the work and fewer exits from the field. Although this literature has sought to strengthen the workforce by focusing on quality and standards, limited research has explored how experienced youth workers already understand and construct their sense of occupational identity and how this identity relates to their career persistence. Therefore, this study addresses the following primary question: How do practitioners who continue in the field of youth work understand and describe their occupational identity and its role in their persistence in the work? I explored this central question through three guiding sets of questions:

1. What intrinsically motivates experienced youth workers’ entry and persistence?
And, how do these motivations shape practitioners’ occupational identity?
2. What social conditions and barriers continually challenge youth workers’ persistence? What strategies do youth workers employ to cope with or mitigate these challenges?

3. What extrinsic factors and supports encourage occupational identity development and persistence?

Utilizing narrative inquiry as a methodology, this research explores both the intrinsic motivations and extrinsic influences that shape youth workers' occupational identity development and sense of commitment to the field. Between 2017 and 2019, I interviewed twenty youth workers who had completed five or more years in youth work. These interview participants, whom all hail from a metropolitan area in the Northeast, opened their doors in both literal and metaphorical ways, inviting me to visit their programs and neighborhoods, and sharing their life stories and career pathways. Through these life-story interviews, these individuals explained the underlying motivations, supports, and challenges that shaped their livelihoods. In the rest of this introductory chapter, I discuss my use of the terms *youth work* and *youth worker*, recount a brief history of youth work in the U.S., and provide an overview of this dissertation study.

Defining Youth Work

Youth work has most recently been used as a unifying term in the United States for people working in different youth related sectors in a range of settings, such as youth development, out-of-school time programs, afterschool, and youth services (Borden, Garza, & Stone, 2004; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). The youth work profession is more formally recognized in countries such as the U.K. and Canada. Therefore, a preferred definition for youth workers in the U.S. originates from the U.K.; a youth worker is someone who works “with or on behalf of youth to facilitate their personal, social, and educational development and enables them to gain a voice, influence, and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence” (PAULO, 2002, p. 1). The

youth work field entails the theory, knowledge, and practice of providing support and developmental guidance for children and adolescents; it lies at the intersection of education, human development, and social work (Fusco, 2012). However, like teaching, youth work philosophies and approaches vary depending on the program activities, goals, context, and beliefs held by the individuals and organizations involved.

A Brief History of Youth Work in the United States

To understand the contemporary issues related to youth worker identity and persistence, I provide some historical context about this field and profession. The emergence of youth work reflected changes in household, labor, and urbanization patterns. As schooling became mandatory and the movement to end child labor gained traction in the late nineteenth century, local educators, social activists, and pastors began providing clubs and social events for children and youth in schools, settlement houses, storefronts, and churches (Benson, Harkavy, Johanek, & Puckett, 2009; Brooker, 2014; Halpern, 2002; Hirsch, 2005; Warren, 2005). During this time, late childhood and adolescence began to be constructed as a distinct age group deemed in need of adult oversight (Fusco, 2018; Kwon, 2013).

Early community programs were informal while purpose-driven; they primarily focused on activities such as sports, English language learning, and cultural celebrations (Brooker, 2014; Halpern, 2002; Hirsch, 2005). Originally segregated by both race and gender, many clubs were designed exclusively for White boys, only later expanding opportunities to girls and African-Americans (Freeman, 2002; Halpern, 2002; Fusco, 2018). However, Black communities concurrently established their own youth activities and clubs through churches and Black settlement houses (Fusco, 2018). Settlement

houses like Jane Addams's Hull House offered assistance to new European immigrant families and sought to socialize girls growing up in the city, helping them find a sense of independence in rapidly changing urban contexts that offered new roles for women outside the home (Addams, 1909). In these original youth program settings, a variety of community members took the lead in creating programs and providing informal mentorship to children growing up in cities.

Youth services continued to expand during World War II, and with this, so did both paid and voluntary youth work. In response to the war, faith-based organizations such as the YMCA and the Boys and Girls Brigade prioritized fitness for children and youth, considering physical health to be a key component of citizenship (Brooker, 2014). In the 1950s and 60s, youth workers were integral in running group homes and residential care centers (Freeman, 2002). Along with the expansion of these programs, the range of youth workers' roles and activities expanded as well.

Youth workers and youth organizers also developed programs as sites of resistance to oppressive schooling practices (Ginwright & Cammorata, 2002; Kirshner, 2015; Sturkey, 2010). Youth workers developed alternative programs and educational spaces to rethink and redress education received or erased in public school curricula (Baldrige, Medina, Beck & Reeves, 2017; Kwon, 2013). For example, during the Civil Rights movement, local Black leaders, White college students, and volunteer activists came together to develop "Freedom Schools" in Mississippi, alternative summer spaces of academic learning, civic education, Black history, and empowerment for Black youth (Sturkey, 2010). As Amory Starr (2003) later found in analyzing interviews with youth

workers from across the country, “[y]outh workers see their work in the context of historical struggles for liberation in their local communities” (p. 5).

In the 1980s, many programs were established to provide activities and enrichment for young people deemed “at-risk” during unsupervised afterschool and weekend hours (Baldrige, 2019; Baldrige, Medina, Beck, & Reeves, 2017). During this era, youth were oftentimes characterized as “problems” in need of “fixing” by social institutions (Fusco, 2018). However, youth workers and scholars also began to push back against these deficit-oriented conceptualizations of adolescence. Youth workers reframed programs as sites of “positive youth development,” an approach that centralizes individual strengths and assets that could be developed in young people. The positive youth development model became popular among youth workers and scholars alike, and, by the 1990s, community-based out-of-school time programs were recognized as sites of safety, youth development, and academic support (Hirsch, 2005; McLaughlin, 2000). Further validation for youth programs were provided through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act 1994, which initiated a federal funding stream for “21st Century Community Learning Centers,” afterschool programs that partnered with schools. However, despite the influx of public and private financial support, funding for these programs was still precarious and increasingly dependent on measurable academic markers of achievement. Robert Halpern (2000) illuminated complexities in this current era of out-of-school time programs: “In the face of growing, and disparate, interest stands a field that is itself a complex mix: identifiable yet extraordinarily heterogeneous; vibrant yet fragile; a protected space for play and enriching experiences, yet increasingly burdened with compensatory tasks” (p. 186). Therefore, while programming changed to

meet societal needs and funding requirements, youth workers have increasingly been caught between aims of doing the responsive support while also taking on more responsibility for youth's "readiness" and compliance with academics, college preparation, and the workforce (Baldrige, 2014; Halpern, 2000; Fusco et al., 2013).

Today, youth work occurs in a variety of contexts, including schools, community centers, nonprofit sports clubs, libraries, museums, public gardens, summer camps, and juvenile detention centers. Youth workers serve diverse populations of youth, including youth in foster care, youth experiencing homelessness, gang-involved youth, immigrant youth, youth of color, and youth who have dropped out of school. They may specialize in content areas such as arts, writing, college access, sports, leadership, and service learning (Ginwright, 2010; Halpern, 2000). It is important to note that terms like "afterschool practitioner" has often been used to describe people working in school-age care programming, which provides services for children ages 6 to 12. "Youth work" and "youth worker" are monikers that have been most frequently used for practitioners working with adolescents in cities and high poverty neighborhoods. This usage reveals the racial history of who was perceived in need of adult supervision in programs and construction of "saviors" and "heroes" in these contexts (Baldrige, 2016; Kwon, 2013).

While the enduring leadership of youth workers has guided the development and sustenance of youth programs, it is only over the past thirty-five years that practitioners have come together to discuss their practices, expertise, and collective fate as an occupation. U.S. youth workers, whose work with young people span very distinct community contexts, have typically been beholden to the policies of individual organizations or local government systems, who determine their salaries, potential career

growth, and professional opportunities. Policymakers, researchers, and youth workers have developed national, state, and city-level associations, research centers, and advocacy organizations (Borden, Garza, & Stone, 2004; Fusco, 2012; Quinn, 2012; Wisman, 2011). The increase in dual working households, advocacy for low cost out-of-school time programs, and the establishment of 21st Century Community Learning Centers have propelled support to “professionalize” the afterschool and youth development workforces through training, publications, professional membership organizations, research-based staff competencies, and the development of credentialing systems (Emslie, 2013; Freeman, 2002; Fusco, 2012; Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009).

The professionalization process has animated conversation around youth work while also revealing disagreements within field. These debates have complicated a single narrative of purpose, knowledge, or philosophy around youth work. With a multiplicity of narratives of youth work in U.S., the effort to address issues of youth worker turnover in nonprofits or career exits has become a diffuse one as well (Halpern, 1999; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Although increased credentialing and licensure programs are proposed as possible solutions, it is still unclear what, if, any kinds of professionalization efforts will inspire or motivate longer commitments from youth workers.

Dissertation Chapter Overview

This dissertation presents an in-depth investigation of youth work “persisters” and considers how they created paths in the absence of clear roadmaps for career development and growth. In my literature review and conceptual framework chapter, I discuss the key bodies of literature that informed my research design and empirically driven arguments. I discuss the current research on youth workers in the United States,

and, in particular, the research that explores issues of youth worker retention and recruitment. I also highlight professionalization efforts in the field and how these conversations illuminate the ways in which youth workers' future identities and roles are caught up in debates about what degrees and credentialing are necessary. I suggest that the existing research on youth workers' role construction is limited. Therefore, moving toward occupational inquiry into the lives of experienced youth workers can help the field better understand both the identity development and career choices that are occurring within it. Based on these arguments, I share key concepts from occupational theory as framing for my research questions. This theory elucidates the ways in which intrinsic motivations and external influences shape occupational motivations over time, which can offer windows into the identity and culture of persisters.

In Chapter 3, I discuss how the literature and conceptual framework informed my questions and methodological design, and vice versa. Given that this was a qualitative study, my initial questions changed as informed by my analysis of narrative inquiry-based interviews with youth workers. In this chapter, readers are introduced to the sample of 20 "persisters" identified by snowball sampling, who were continuing in youth work at the time of the study. I share my research design and process for data collection and analysis, considering the ways in which my relationship to the research and identification with it shaped both rapport with youth workers as well as my sensitivities to their stories.

The next three chapters highlight key findings from cross-case analysis. In Chapter 4, "We are the Glue," I make three key arguments. The first is that initial motivations for youth worker entry varied greatly among persisters; however, the commonality was that these individuals were in a broader search for meaningful and

purposeful work. These youth workers, through very distinct activities and approaches, remained in the field, driven by their love for working with young people. I argue that these intrinsic motivations suggest that youth workers' construct their occupational identities as *community callings*, in which they see their work as more than just jobs and describe their commitments to particular populations of young people and place-based communities as the driving factors in their persistence. The treatment of work as this *community calling* relates to youth workers' construction of their roles and responsibilities as "boundaryless" in three key ways (a) in their obligation to youth, families, and community (b) in time spent on the job and (c) in its coexisting relationship with other occupational identities (e.g. artist) and related fields.

In Chapter 5, "All the Passion, but no Benefits" I discuss the ways in which youth workers depend on their constructions of their work identities as community callings to navigate a variety of negative external barriers and social conditions. To persist, youth workers employed a variety of coping strategies to mitigate the effects of gentrification and student loan debt, toxic and disconnected organizational cultures, job burnout, and family pressures to leave the field. Coping to stay in youth work took on the form of taking on multiple jobs, job-hopping, a renegotiation of the time aspect of their "boundaryless" roles, and advancement to management. These coping strategies, however, resulted in personal costs and concessions as well, particularly impacting youth workers who were first generation college students or from low-income and working-class families.

I explore extrinsic supports in Chapter 6, "It's Not Just Me," which encourage a sense of belonging, enable critical learning experiences, and affirm the value of youth

work. These supports further strengthen occupational identity, and confirm for youth workers that they are neither alone nor indulgent in their choice of work. “Organizational lifers” shed light on key ways in which their programs strengthened their sense of expertise and worth on the job. However, in identifying key facets of these external supports, such as career mentors, professional networks, organizational curricular resources, and advancement opportunities, I argue that interpersonal supports (e.g. family financial support) still play a large factor in who can persist and who cannot. I share insights into the experiences of persisters who are at a career crossroads and transition out, demonstrating the limitations of current extrinsic supports in fostering persistence. In highlighting this dilemma, I discuss how the relationship between identity and persistence is delicate; without stronger extrinsic supports both professionally and organizationally to nourish both occupational identity and persistence, I argue that the nonprofit sector has become dependent on persisters who see their work as callings. While youth workers’ boundaryless constructions enable them to envision carrying their youth work identities into other kinds of professional and interdisciplinary work, I suggest that the youth work sector will continue perpetuating workforce inequality and replicating the intergenerational poverty that it seeks to redress.

In my conclusion, I provide an overview of the study’s claims; in particular I highlight the influential role of extrinsic barriers and supports in both identity development and persistence. I also consider the implications of my findings for research, policy, and practice, and I make recommendations for each of these three areas.

Chapter 2: Understanding Youth Work Identity and Persistence

Over the past twenty years, a small but growing body of research has delved into the black box of youth worker identity and culture – their beliefs, roles, and practices in this work. Still, to specifically address issues of both recruitment and retention, and in an effort to lift the status of this occupation, much of the literature in youth work has focused on field-building and professionalization efforts. This has included studies that identify shared goals and competencies of youth workers, compare youth work to other occupations, and debate the proper academic and professional home for these endeavors. However, limited research has considered how occupational identity and culture play into youth workers' decision-making about their career path and persistence in the field.

In this chapter, I begin by sharing the current research on youth worker demographics, their reasons for organizational and career exits, and nascent findings on youth worker persistence. I discuss the debated solution of professionalization to issues of staff turnover and career exits. I then feature key findings from the current empirical work on youth workers' role constructions. By linking questions of persistence to one about occupational identity, I then introduce conceptual research on work precarity and occupations that can help us better understand this workforce and their commitments. This research illuminates the ways in which we must be attentive to the sociological concepts of work precarity and invisibility as well as psychosocial dimensions such as intrinsic motivations and work meaningfulness. I highlight the role of extrinsic influences on occupation identity development. Ultimately, I bridge sociological and psychosocial conceptual understandings of occupational identity as a theoretical framework for this study.

Bringing Youth Workers into Focus & An Emergent Dilemma

In the 1990s, community-based organizations gained national recognition through federal funding, policies, and initiatives. Through nationally commissioned research reports, scholars identified the afterschool hours as an unsupervised time of “risk” as well as an untapped time of “opportunity” for adolescents growing up in cities with high concentrations of poverty and violence. Community youth programs were determined to be essential sites of safety, continued learning, and positive development for school-age children and adolescents, an answer to a variety of public concerns (The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992, Eccles & Gootman, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000). A growing body of research and evaluation has provided empirical evidence that youth programs can increase young people’s self-esteem, improve their sense of self-efficacy, provide a sense of psychological and physical safety, build leadership skills, reduce drug and alcohol use, and improve academic outcomes (e.g. test scores, attendance, class participation) (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Vandell et al., 2006).

Across this literature, scholars identified a similar “critical ingredient” to youth programs with positive outcomes – long-term, caring relationships between adults and youth (Halpern, 1990; Hirsch, 2005, McLaughlin, 2000; Rhodes, 2004). Researchers and evaluators also documented poor working conditions for youth workers, the marginalized status of this work, and issues of frontline staff turnover as high as 40% per year (Halpern, 2002). As observed by the authors who comprised The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1992) report:

Youth-serving agencies, religious youth groups, sports programs, parks and recreation services, and libraries all report that the adults who work with young

people in their systems, whether serving on a paid or voluntary basis, are the most critical factor in whether a program succeeds, but do not receive adequate training, ongoing support and supervision, or public recognition. (p.87).

However, these mentions of the workforce were oftentimes secondary to the central focus on youth outcomes. McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman's book, *Urban Sanctuaries*, (1994) offered one of the first in-depth portrait of youth workers. The book featured six community program leaders, labelled "wizards" because of their long-term commitments to the work, their ability to successfully engage teenagers in their programs, and a connection that "is ... difficult to emulate because it is highly personal" (p.37). In their account, these authors focused on these impactful youth workers in highly successful yet remarkably different neighborhood programs (e.g. YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, a Gymnastics Club, Girl Scouts Troop, etc).

While *Urban Sanctuaries* offered an important window into the practices and beliefs of these youth workers, empirical scholarship and comprehensive data on youth workers continued to be limited into the early 21st century. In 2003, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) expressed its unsuccessful attempt to identify coordinated, nationally representative information about youth workers, partially attributing this failure to mistrust that they sensed from programs about sharing their data. In light of this, among the examined social service occupations, the report authors deemed the youth services sector "the least documented, least understood, and probably most varied field" that was investigated within human services (p.12). Gleaning findings from secondary analysis of youth worker data from the National Assembly (1999) study on Salaries and Benefits in Youth Development Agencies, AECF asserted that "the lack of good

information about youth workers and what they do stands in sharp contrast to the documented benefits of youth programs” (p.12).

The Annie E. Casey Foundation report brought to light pressing issues for the youth work profession writ large. Although the findings were not surprising for youth service providers and practitioners, the report highlighted and confirmed the challenging work conditions — low pay, increasing bureaucratic demands, lack of supervision, and decreasing agency — experienced by frontline human service workers in sectors such as child welfare, childcare, juvenile justice, and youth services. From the perspective of program managers, service organizations reported issues of turnover and identifying “high quality staff” who wanted to stay in the work. These report findings created waves across social services sectors, and two initiatives, one conducted by a national collaborative – the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition (led by the Forum for Youth Investment (Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006) – and the other by a membership organization, National Afterschool Association (2006)) – sought to further illuminate youth worker characteristics and trends through broad-reaching surveys and theoretically sampled focus groups. More specifically, these collaboratives sought to capture national demographics, work satisfaction levels, reasons for entry and exit, and potential incentives to stay in the field. Yohalem et al. (2006) responded to AECF’s call, and acknowledged that the field of youth work had been left “dangerously undefined,” which “has an impact on both the public recognition of the work and on its ability to advance as a profession” (p.4).

Findings from the National Afterschool Association and Forum for Youth Investment surveys, although not generalizable, set the stage for my inquiry into

experienced youth worker identity and commitments. The Forum for Youth Investment surveyed 1,053 frontline youth workers and 195 organization directors, and it held focus groups with approximately 70 youth workers in eight mid-size and large cities across the United States. Based on this sampling, 59 percent identified as African-American, 7 percent as Hispanic/Latino, and 27 percent as White. Approximately 70 percent identified as female and more than half of the respondents reported being under the age of 30. 50 percent of survey participants indicated that they worked full-time in youth work and 60 percent of youth workers had a minimum of a two-year college degree or more of education. This study found that 80 percent of youth workers indicated that they were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their current employment, which greatly exceeds mean satisfaction across other types of employment.

In the National Afterschool Association study, an intentionally similar survey was disseminated to the organization’s members. 4,346 afterschool practitioners responded to the survey from a wide range of member organizations such as YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, 21st Century Community Learning Centers (federally funded, school-based programs), as well as a wide variety of independent community and school-based programs serving children ages 5 to 18. Whereas this organizations also did not make any claims about the representativeness of youth workers in its study, the sample included respondents from all fifty states as well as those from a range of urban, rural, and suburban locations. Interestingly, in this sample, 42 percent of youth workers were over the age of 40, 60 percent identified as full time workers, 86 percent as female, and 73 percent as White/Caucasian, which already differs greatly from the previous study’s findings.

The discrepancies between these two sets of survey results are in part due to differences in membership. The National Afterschool Association is a membership organization that represents more practitioners working in nationally recognized school-age care (age 6-12) organizations. In contrast, the Forum for Youth Investment study disseminated their survey to city-based networks, capturing more practitioners serving adolescents (12-21) in mid-sized cities.

These studies combined characterized and challenged presumptions about occupational backgrounds, investment, and persistence. More than half of youth workers had a four-year degree or higher. This finding alone countered prevailing generalizations about the education level and attractiveness of this work. Together, the studies revealed different kinds of diversity, ranging from racial background to years spent in the field to the ages of youth workers. The Forum for Youth Investment study, with its focus on urban youth work, captured an almost inverse proportion of youth workers of color than the National Afterschool Association survey. It found that, “African Americans are more represented in the youth work workforce than they are in the general population, sometimes significantly so. In Kansas City and Jacksonville, for example, the proportion of those surveyed who are African Americans is more than twice that found in the general population” (Yohalem, et al., 2006, p. 14). This representativeness is intriguing, especially in a time in which most public school teachers are white (Ahmad & Boser, 2014), and recent research has revealed that non-Black teachers having significantly lower expectations for Black male students in comparison to Black teachers (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). The Forum survey also identified a much younger workforce, which may speak to the unstable, under-valued, and under-resourced nature of youth-

serving jobs in urban centers with youth workers of color in contrast to suburban areas with predominantly white populations.

A critical paradox emerged across two studies capturing demographic information about youth workers. These practitioners reported anomalously high levels of work satisfaction (in comparison to other occupations in other industries) and a commitment to working with children and youth, regardless of full time or part time employment. However, in spite of their documented interest and investment, youth workers also conveyed burnout, frequent “hopping” across jobs, as well as anticipated exits from the field (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006, p. 7). This paradox – of high satisfaction and investment coupled with organizational turnover and anticipated early career exits (typically once practitioners entered their thirties) – has vexed a field whose central work has been to provide critical mentorship and long-term, positive relationships for young people.

Why They Leave, Why They Stay: Current Explanations of Youth Work Trajectories

Scholars and policymakers have both speculated and investigated why frequent organizational departures (at times 30 - 40% a year) and early exits in youth work occur (Halpern, 2002). Past research has identified several external reasons for why youth workers exit and barriers to occupational persistence. These reasons have included low salaries relative to other human-service related jobs, minimal on-site resources, job insecurity, nebulous and overwhelming job responsibilities, a lack of on-site mentorship and supervision, and few opportunities for advancement (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; LaRoche & Klein, 2008; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006).

At a societal level, scholars have argued that the youth work occupation has been regarded as “low status,” often perceived as “low skill,” “babysitting” or a “stepping

stone” to other work (Borden, 2002; Emslie, 2013; Fusco, 2012; LaRoche & Klein, 2008; Stone, Garza, & Borden, 2004; Wisman, 2012). Abbott and Meerabeau (1998) and Mehta (2013) have suggested that the undervaluing of work associated with women – work focused on emotion, care, and support – has led to marginalization of occupations such as nursing, social work, and teaching. These fields, still numerically dominated by women, have been understood to be service oriented “semi-professions,” as opposed to the structural professionalism discussed in “male-dominated professions” of medicine and law (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998). This subjugation seems salient to youth work, which is also a field that is dominated by women, focused on care and support, and perceived as primarily service oriented and voluntary (see NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006).

Despite the need for expertise, the “low status” perception has prevailed in how youth workers are compensated. Social service organizations, particularly nonprofits, provide low pay, oftentimes minimum wage hourly rates, few or no benefits like health care, paid leave, and retirement plans, and offer few opportunities to move from part-time or hourly pay to salaried work (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). In comparison to professionals in other public and human services, those who work with children and youth in programs are among the most poorly paid (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003). Nicole Yohalem and colleagues (2006) have described this impact as “extrinsic factors” pay, a dearth of growth opportunities, and a lack of recognition that affect youth workers’ ability to continue in the work. An additional interpretation, based on focus group findings in the Forum for Youth Investment study, was that youth workers left the field in their early

thirties when seeking to financially support their families (Yohalem et al., 2006), as related to the financial and emotional toll of this work.

While the neighborhood level has not been fully explored, some consideration has been given to the compounding stressors depending on where youth workers live, work, and travel. In a recent study of job stress among afterschool professionals working in parks and recreation programs, Affrunti, Mehta, Rusch, and Frazier (2018) found that low socioeconomic and health opportunities (e.g. low proximity to health facilities, parks, grocery stores with fresh produce) influenced job stress among afterschool practitioners; this is to say, under-resourced neighborhood contexts partially shaped both job demands and resources, as well as increased stress levels. The “job demands-resources” model and inventory illuminates the ways in which job stress, work engagement, and job motivation correlate to both job resources and job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). It should be noted that “job resources” in this model include institutional supports, organizational supports, as well as individual coping strategies.

Within organizations, youth workers have reported receiving minimal supervision and oftentimes felt under-prepared and under-trained on entry (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Anderson-Nathe, 2008; NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Even when they were trained, researchers have found weak links between opportunities for training and career advancement, as there were few job advancement or growth opportunities present in the workplace (LaRoche & Klein, 2008; NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). When there was intellectual or professional growth, this did not map onto financial growth or increased agency. To receive federal dollar and philanthropic grants, youth workers

within afterschool and youth programs have experienced increased managerial & bureaucratic control, which impedes the relational and developmental aspects central to their missions in this work (Baldrige, 2014, 2018; Fusco, D., Lawrence, A., Matloff-Nieves, S., & Ramos, E., 2013). More recent ethnographic work by McLaughlin (2018) and Baldrige (2019) have explored how changes in organizational leadership and management that focus on neoliberal models of programmatic outcomes and deficit orientations to youth of color have also compelled youth workers to leave organizations.

Judy Nee, author of the NAA report, considered that youth work data may be indicative of a “tale of two workforces,” of part-time staff and full time program directors, one in which part-time staff were not as invested and treated the work like a job versus full-time staff who saw their work as a career in which to persist. However, given that there was indication that part-time staff desired full time work according to the national studies, I argue that the portrayal of youth work as a temporary job may actually just be a construction out of financial necessity and that perhaps youth workers could envision full careers if provided full-time opportunities.

At the occupational level, youth workers have frequently stitched together several roles and responsibilities (Anderson-Nathe, 2008; Baldrige, 2018), which, without necessary job resources can lead to emotional stress, vicarious trauma, and burnout (Anderson-Nathe; 2008; Affrunti, Mehta, Rusch, & Frazier, 2018; AECF, 2003; LaRoche & Klein, 2008; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Anderson-Nathe (2008) found that “an adherence to a standard of ‘supercompetence’ [i.e. knowing without training] and reluctance to admit to or share experiences to the contrary” have led to feelings of vicarious trauma and crisis for youth workers” (p. 19). Additionally, he discovered that

for youth workers, who frequently describe their work as a “vocation,” not-knowing can be even more jarring, as it undermines both the assumed expertise of a calling as well as a potential sense of professional identity absent adequate training and skills to address these “in the moment” dilemmas.

Little research has explored the process and phenomena of burnout, its influences, people’s experiences with it, and its outcomes, as related to youth work job-hopping and exits (Affrunti, Mehta, Rusch, and Frazier, 2018; Anderson-Nathe, 2006). Psychologist Christina Maslach used the term “burnout syndrome” to describe the experience of prolonged emotional stress of professionals in interpersonal caregiving (in fields such as teaching, nursing, and social work) (Maslach, 2003). Since then, understandings of burnout have expanded to a wide range of occupations (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). The consequences of burnout are emotional exhaustion, a cynicism that includes psychological detachment and depersonalization from service and care oriented work, as well as a feeling of inefficacy (Maslach, 2003). Maslach has explored the signs that caregivers are “at risk” of burnout. Over the years, job burnout has been investigated across several occupations and contextualized by exploration of situational factors at the individual, occupational, and organizational level (Maslach et al., 2001).

Although there is investigation into youth workers’ exits, there is minimal research that uncovers why a subsection of youth workers continue in the field beyond a couple years. There has been a common understanding among youth work scholars that youth workers who stay for longer construct their work in a *vocational* way (Baizerman, 1996; Fusco, 2012), meaning that there is a sense of underlying purpose that offers

motivation and drive for the work, and some empirical work to justify this claim (Starr, 2003; Walker, 2003). Additionally, the assumption of professionalization literature in youth work is that building formalized recognition (through both financial incentives and certification) would encourage qualified and “high quality” practitioners to both enter, develop occupational attachments, and stay in the field. through interpretation of youth workers’ meaning making about what keeps them motivated and engaged in the work. In this section, I consider the nascent literature about retention as well as the professionalization debate that begins to consider the ideas of work identity and persistence.

In examining predictors of youth workers’ intention to stay in the field (n=886), Hartje and colleagues (2008) found that higher education was *not* a strong predictor of continuity; however, (a) job-related training, (b) practitioners’ beliefs in their capability for the work, (c) connections to the life experiences of youth, (d) support from colleagues, and (e) engagement in organizational decision-making were all associated with intentions to stay. Blattner & Franklin (2017) found that the most committed and satisfied afterschool practitioners were those who felt that they *chose* this work (rather than feeling like they resorted to it) and had agency within it. They call this attribution “work volition.” Additionally, the connection to strong field-based mentors was a predominant factor in commitment and satisfaction. Relatedly, empirical work on youth workers has found that experienced practitioners understand their work as “necessary” (Starr, 2003; McLaughlin & Irby, 1994). Lastly, status assumptions about the skill level for youth workers overlook craft knowledge and expertise that experienced practitioners have developed through professional training and lived experience, which indicates that

there are indeed opportunities for youth workers to learn and grow when these opportunities are provided (Larson et al., 2014; Ross, 2013).

Professionalizing the field has often been the proffered answer to the dilemmas of persistence in youth work. In a conference forum on recruiting and sustaining youth workers, a participant posed this central question: “How do we get past the public perception that anyone can do this work? We will always be struggling, if people cannot get past this perception. We need to recognize the professionalism of our youth workers” (Borden, Garza, & Stone, 2004, p. 4). This particular quote manifests the desire for acknowledgment of worth and expertise currently not conferred upon youth workers. The research on professional status in youth work illuminates central matters of status, power, and inequality, which are applicable to interpreting professionalization efforts in youth work (Abbott, 1993; Hughes, 1970; Vallas, Finlay, & Wharton, 2009).

The desire for professional status is inextricably tied to desires to improve working conditions and encourage longer commitments to the field. These conditions include financial reward, growth opportunities, and a sense of agency on the job, which are all ingredients to foster good work and thriving practitioners. Emslie (2013) has written, “improving the standing, funding and career structures of youth workers would be a welcome development for those practitioners who have been sidelined and lacked influence in multidisciplinary situations and are concerned about inadequate resourcing, job insecurity and precarious wages” (p. 127).

Additionally, trainers and academics are invested in preparing future youth workers by defining and shaping a unified body of knowledge for the field (Emslie, 2013; Fusco, 2012; Pittman, 2004). As Borden (2002) has posed:

The fragmentation of educational opportunities prevents youth development professionals from acquiring the necessary educational foundations and the skills to create quality youth development programs that promote the positive development of young people. We can no longer afford to have youth development professionals who are forced to use only their best instincts and guess work at what makes a difference in the lives of young people. (p. 7)

Lastly and relatedly, there is the belief that training requirements and credentialing systems can ensure recruiting and retaining “high quality” staff (National Afterschool Association, 2012; see Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006). In a study on the North American Certification Project, a competency based examination process for child and youth care workers, certified practitioners were 2.7 times more likely to be scored as high performers by their supervisors than non-certified practitioners, after controlling for the effects of race, gender, education, experience, and certification exam score (Curry, Eckles, Stuart, Schneider-Muñoz, & Qaqish, 2013). Shared competencies and evaluation systems could provide trainers and organization managers more standardized methods for hiring and evaluating youth workers.

While the reasons for youth worker professionalization are apparent and manifold, scholars of youth work debate the ways in which it should happen and its potential outcomes. First, some scholars have argued that organization-controlled professionalism can pose a threat to youth worker autonomy (Emslie, 2013; Fusco, 2012; Walker, 2003). A second concern with current professionalization efforts is that it undermines the core principle of youth work to “meet young people where they are at” (Fusco & Baizerman, 2013; Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2013). Youth workers typically

bring an ecological perspective to their work, in which they invoke contextually grounded knowledge and understanding as part of their knowledge and skills (Ross, 2013; Starr, 2003). This requires a form of flexibility that is not typically afforded in the neoliberal paradigm of youth services (Baldrige, 2014, 2019). Karen Pittman (2004), director of the Forum for Youth Investment, has critiqued professionalization arguments put forth by advocates of afterschool programs, who focused on the youth work occupation as complementing teachers by time and place rather than by differing strategies and outcomes.

The prevailing professionalizing efforts, which align with youth work with school-based efforts, focuses on their accountability to schools, funders, and policymakers, rather than the communities being served (Baldrige, 2014, 2019; Fusco, Mattloff-Nieves, & Ramos, 2013). As Pittman (2004) contended, “young people do not grow up in programs; they grow up in communities. Therefore, youth work should not just be practiced in programs but be present in communities” (p. 97). Abbott and Meerabeau (1998) interpreted similarly fraught relationships in nursing and social work, noting that both groups of practitioners are “employed within bureaucratic organizations – which means they might have to take actions against the wishes of their clients” (p. x). They also considered the ways in which professionalization might actually be “disabling” to very individualized, client needs based approach of care work. Thus, management driven standardization may undermine the relational nature of youth work that brings youth workers to the work in the first place.

Professions also operate with underlying assumptions around the importance of fixed knowledge and expertise that seem contrarian to the ethos of youth workers. Dana

Fusco (2013) has questioned whether professions are indeed the “appropriate suitor” for youth work. Concerned by the emphasis on positivist science within the professional paradigm, this youth work scholar argues that the field is better guided by an ethic of care, room for imagination, and reflexive and critical practices as inspired by educational scholars and thinkers such as Paulo Freire and bell hooks.

Finally, professionalization that demands specific degree pathways may cause exits and disrupt the existing experiential, educational, and racial diversity of youth workers (Johnson-Goodstar & Roholt, 2013). In the research, youth workers often reflected on their own childhood experiences in urban environments as a way to both relate and work with young people (Halpern, 2000; Watson, 2012). Professionalization, through requiring specific degrees in higher education may actually decrease the current diversity of youth workers. This might have unintended consequences for the outcomes of this work and the youth it serves, as current practitioners may have insider community and content related knowledge that may be equally or more valuable than college degrees or licensure.

Youth Workers’ Role Constructions

A Workforce That Cares

Early literature on youth workers from research on community-based youth programs portrayed youth workers as highly invested and passionate about their work. In a yearlong ethnographic study of a network of community organizations in a low-income Latino neighborhood in Chicago, Robert Halpern and his colleagues described the formation of genuine relationships formed between youth workers and afterschool participants (Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000). Later, in his evaluation of a three-city

afterschool program initiative, Halpern noted his general observations of youth workers: “Staff–child relationships in afterschool programs are typically warm and comfortable” (2002, p. 186). These types of ongoing family–like support are similarly reflected in McLaughlin’s (2000) national study of neighborhood programs. She observed: “As in the ideal family, adults provide caring, consistent, and dependable supports for youth and are available as needed” (p. 16) This idea of warmth is further echoed in the book *A Place to Call Home*, an ethnographic study of youth experiences in six Boys and Girls Clubs (Hirsch, 2005). In his team’s time at these afterschool centers, Hirsch (2005) comments, “we were struck by the warmth and caring readily evident in the relationships between club staff and youth, and the ways in which these adults strove to educate their charges about the ways of the world” (p. 58). In their study on youth engagement in out-of-school time programs, Intrator and Siegel (2014) depicted youth program leaders as individuals who were willing to “throw everything and the kitchen sink at the intractable problem of helping high-need but promising young people fulfill the American dream” (p. 5). Through close examination of four youth development programs, they found the staff working with youth to be “young, enthusiastic, intelligent, and enthusiastic” (p.63). These researchers all identified the need for invested and passionate youth workers to make these programs attractive and engaging for young people.

Defining Themselves: Responsive, “Necessary,” Constructions

Although youth work has a marginal status among professions, past research demonstrates that youth workers see their work as critical. This is particularly for practitioners working with minoritized youth populations. In Amory Starr’s interviews, urban youth workers have described their work as “necessary,” “a cause,” and beset by a

sense of urgency that “it’s going to have to be us [the youth workers]” who support young people (Starr, 2003; p.3). Youth workers in this study shared aphorisms from a variety of traditions, such as “all the children are our children,” “it takes a village to raise a child,” and “[t]o whom much is given, much is expected.” Starr compared urban youth workers’ sense of community responsibility and collective commitment to youth to “race men” and “race women” – African-American community members engaged in social uplift in many city and towns across in the United States (Portwood, 2010). This study revealed that youth workers’ occupational identity was deeply tied to both community need and community obligation.

This necessary work can mean taking on different roles as needed to support a young person. Researchers have noted the multiple roles that youth workers take on to be responsive and relational. In her ethnographic study of a community-based youth program, Educational Excellence, Baldrige (2018) found “youth workers fulfilled a variety of roles—they are educators, counselors, cultural workers, mediators, and negotiators who assist youth of color as they construct their identities in a racially hostile society” (p.3). She listed youth workers donning “many hats: teacher, counselor, curriculum developer, janitor, disciplinarian, mentor, party planner, trainer, tutor, grant writer, or marketing strategist” (p.3). Intrator and Siegel (2014) also noted the variety of roles that youth workers take on, such as “friend, advocate, coach, tutor, mentor, and repository of procedural knowledge” (as related to organizational structures) (p.64). They observed program staff who were from selective colleges and universities, who took on academic and college access support roles; there were also former program participants who could share their own lived experiences, offer advice, and brought with them an

energy to the work that was not “domain specific-expertise” (p. 63). Baldrige (2018) found Black women youth workers at Educational Excellence were resistant to characterizing themselves as “saviors” and “heroes,” tropes that oftentimes dominate fundraising and programming efforts in cities particularly with White and Black male leadership. Youth workers in her study found these singular narratives to be damaging and deficit oriented in their constructions.

Furthermore, Baldrige (2018) systematically expands on youth workers’ roles as educators who are responsive to Black youths’ unmet needs in schools. In her study of Educational Excellence, she identified youth workers’ practice as grounded in their community-based knowledge. They worked as educational advocates, cultural workers, and pedagogues, building on an awareness of school systems and culturally relevant pedagogy to inspire and motivate learning among young people. These youth workers created intentional programming that considered the social construction of race and gender in society, thus helping young people “read the world” in a Freirean sense and allowing them to imagine alternative possibilities for pedagogy and engagement in education.

Relational, Youth-Centered Constructions of the Work

Across the research, the youth-centered relational practice of mentoring, caring for, and educating youth has been the central role construction of youth workers (Hirsch, 2005; Jones & Deutch, 2011; Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013; Watson, 2012). In an interview, Watson (2012) pressed Dereca Blackmon, a community-based educator in Oakland, on what her approach and understanding of her role is for young people and what it means to be effective. Blackmon responded, “.. all I ever do really do when I’m

like at my very very best is hold up a mirror to their life and say what do you think about that...and that's it. That's really all that it is at its core. And [the youth] get it because they're so damn smart" (p.44). She goes on to say, "it's just activating what's in them...I have to remember, I'm frosting, I'm not cake...They cake. They're life. They're real people." This youth worker saw her role as the kind of mentor who does not impose her ideas or convictions on young people, but rather, she engages in educational practices that allow young people to make decisions that are best for them on their own.

Hirsch (2005) identified mentoring as the "greatest strength" and "core foundation" of the six Boys and Girls clubs that he and his team observed. He explored the ways in which clubs have become new contexts for "old heads" and "othermothers" who were originally part of the ecosystem of adult support in African-American communities. Describing one of the club practitioners, Hirsch (2005) discussed the ways in which this youth worker mentored through culturally "consonant" and "grounded" conversations with Black male teens at the club about difficult topics such as gender identity, racism, employment, and belonging (p. 61). Through a case illustration of this practitioner, Hirsch (2005) interpreted how this kind of mentorship was based on a long-term development of trust, appreciation and affirmation of youths' identity development, and a willingness to set expectations without micromanaging youths' behavior. This type of ongoing mentorship requires a kind of holistic approach to young people's lives that one youth worker described as an "antidote" to school (Halpern, 2000). To build trusting relationships and culturally grounded communication, youth workers are oftentimes available and accessible both inside and outside programs, oftentimes communicating with youth beyond formal hours. McLaughlin (2000) noted that these kinds of

commitments blur the boundaries between personal and professional life, as youth workers oftentimes live in the communities in which they work.

The research has shown that relationships are central to youth workers' understandings of their identity and role construction. McLaughlin and her co-authors (1994) found that experienced youth workers in community-based programs (a) believed in the potential of their youth, (b) prioritized youth voice and choice in their programs, (c) believed in their own ability to make a difference in youth participants' experiences, (d) felt they were giving back to the community something that they owe, and (e) were authentic and genuine in building relationships with youth. This research also considered youth workers' roles as shaped by their personal backgrounds. The authors portrayed three "home grown" community leaders and three "outsiders" (e.g. geographically, socioeconomically, etc.), determining that regardless of their "insider" or "outsider" identities, all leaders gained respect from the community through leveraging their cultural and social capital to benefit neighborhood youth and families.

Through long-term observation of afterschool and youth interviews, Jones and Deutch (2011) identified strategies of relationship building that they call a "relational pedagogy." These features include (a) minimizing relational distance through using less authority-driven techniques and finding cultural and interest-based connections; (b) active inclusion of marginalized youth; and (c) attention to relational ties such as peers and family members. Several other researchers have considered how youth workers construct these kinds of relational identities in response and connection to other occupations. For example, Noam and Bernstein-Yamashiro (2013) examined teachers and youth workers' construction of their identity within schools, with the premise that

teachers should focus on academic content and cannot take on all roles for youth and schools need more adults who primarily focused on creating a climate of care and concern. While building trust and positive relationships is the work of both teachers and youth workers, they argued that:

We believe teachers should be mentors without becoming social workers. Their mentoring will most likely be supportive of success in schools, and learning and academic success. But we have seen that the teachers who talked to us about this issue are sometimes dealing with a far-reaching set of topics and tasks. While teachers can mentor, youth practitioners *must* do so. (p. 64)

Epstein (2013) studied how teachers and youth workers construct their roles when collaborating with students. Through observations and narrative interviews, she discovered that that youth workers and teachers participated in distinct ways within the parameters of the social action projects. These roles were ones that they assigned for themselves and each other through narrow scripts, in which teachers were depicted as “concerned with rigor, mandates, and discipline” and youth workers “as the appropriate figures to offer a fun, social, and inquiry-based curriculum promoting student voice” (p. 503). For example, youth workers discussed teachers’ burdens of top-down mandates and responsibilities, which they believe they can counter and support through their sense of flexibility and freedom to promote youth voice. Ultimately, Epstein questions these dichotomous constructions created by both teachers and youth workers, exploring the multifaceted roles of both sets of practitioners. Importantly, Epstein focuses on the “relational lens” of occupational work, through situating youth workers as part of an education ecosystem in which adults take on various roles.

Youth Workers' Expertise Across Age and Experience

Interpretations of youth workers' roles also connect to their expertise, that is, both their knowledge and experienced-based practice. There are many sets of competencies regarding what youth workers should know, which have been developed at a city and state level (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009). While these competencies vary by context, they all focus on core information and capabilities needed in this work, including knowledge of safety procedures, curriculum planning, and relationship building with schools and families (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009). While research on competencies have laid out foundational areas of theory and practice, McLaughlin et al.'s (1994) portrayal of youth workers as "wizards" exposes the enigmatic, experiential, and tacit dimensions of practitioners' knowledge.

Empirical research suggests that youth workers frequently draw on childhood experiences as well as past work experience to make sense of their roles and expertise and to connect to youth in their programs (Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000; Hirsch, 2005; McLaughlin, 2000; Watson, 2012). These findings on roles relate back to the research on the network of neighborhood programs in Chicago (Halpern et al., 2000). Via weekly observations and in-depth interviews, this team of researchers found that younger youth workers often took on a closer support role, their relationships with youth often like those of older siblings, and they struggled with authority. Older youth workers took on more of a "parent-like" role with youth, meaning that knowledge and approaches to relationship building changed with both age and experience.

Researchers found youth worker expertise to be situated in "practice wisdom," which is the skills learned from the everyday "tumble of events" that occur within out-of-

school time programs (Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker, 2009; Larson & Walker, 2010). In their review of six years of training and support of a Parks and Recreation system, Baizerman, Roholt, Korum and Rana (2013), shared this definition of practice wisdom: “This is not a softer knowledge; although it likely is not scientifically confirmed, it is how much of the world works. In fact, it may not be recognized, accepted, legitimized, or studied for what it is: knowledge about “the way this world works and the ways of making stuff happen, around here, now” (p. 125). Thus, practice wisdom considers the evolving, contextualized nature of knowledge gained over time. Scholars have examined how practice wisdom informs youth workers’ approach to ethical dilemmas. Through a qualitative matrix analysis of 125 interviews with youth program leaders discussing 250 dilemma stories from 12 programs, Larson & Walker (2010) found that the primary ethical dilemmas raised issues about the boundaries between the professional and personal, as well as the conflicts between organizational policies and the lived realities of youth. As discussed earlier, trusting, personalized relationships are, empirically, the foundation of youth worker practice; however, these relationships can also cause issues about what is the appropriate caring response.

Interpreting this same set of aforementioned data, Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker (2009) have distinguished the decision-making logics of skilled youth workers from novice ones. Whereas skilled practitioners applied ecological reasoning (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) to approach these scenarios, taking into account various dimensions of youth’s lives in their decision-making process, novice youth workers tended to focus on a singular goal of the program and respond to the immediate behavior of youth. Ross (2013) has furthered this investigation of how youth workers apply

knowledge to dilemma situations. She has offered an in-depth case analysis of two experienced youth workers' response to the threat of gun violence in their programs. Similar to Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker (2009)'s interpretation, Ross (2013) found that experienced youth workers were able to approach the complexity and intensity of the dilemma from an ecological perspective, while also drawing on their experiential and contextual knowledge to respond.

While previous scholarship has considered the reasons for youth workers' exits, their role constructions and expertise, and whether professionalization may encourage or discourage retention, there are missing linkages in understanding persistence as related to youth workers' sense of occupational identity and experience. In the second part of this review, I put forth a set of sociological and psychosocial literature on occupations as entry into better understanding youth worker identity and persistence.

An Occupational Framework for Interpreting Identity and Persistence

I argue that we must illuminate experienced youth workers' narratives to (1) examine their constructions of occupational identity and (2) consider its relationship to their explanations for persistence. In youth work, professionalization efforts must be supplemented and supported not just by evaluations or assessment of youth worker quality but also by empirical research at the micro and meso-level of work culture and identity. By bridging sociological and psychological research on occupational identity development, I put forth a key set of concepts that informed my analysis of experienced youth workers' occupational identity and persistence.

Framed by Precarious Work

Based on the existing literature on youth workers' experiences, I argue that these practitioners are navigating a form of "precarious work" (Kalleberg, 2009). As defined by sociologist Arne Kalleberg (2014), precarious work:

...departs from the norm of standard work (i.e., secure employment with an employer; working full-time, year round; working on the employer's premises under his or her supervision; enjoying extensive statutory benefits and entitlements; and having the expectation of being employed indefinitely).

Precarious work thus falls below socially accepted, normative standards by which workers have certain rights and employment protections and bear the risks associated with economic life. (p. 1).

Importantly, Kalleberg has argued that this term be used as related to the "uncertain, unpredictable, and risky" work "from the point of view of the worker" (2009, p. 2). This perspective matters, as it centralizes the perspective and lived experience of employees. Based on these definitions, there are critical ways in which youth work maps on to precarious work (e.g. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; McLaughlin, 2000; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006),

This state of precarity is informed by the ways in which organizations are beholden to a variety of external stakeholders and managers. Halpern (2002) assessed that out-of-school time programs for youth were "vulnerable" and "malleable" institutions, which often succumbed to external financial pressures to keep their doors open and lights on. These programs often rely on philanthropic dollars, state and government funding, and subsidized, and shared facility space. With various forms of funding and in-kind donations, competing interests influence the shape of youth work and

can ultimately reproduce racist and patronizing spaces that many youth workers seek to dismantle (Baldrige, 2014; Kwon, 2013). Recent research by Bianca Baldrige (2014, 2018) and Dana Fusco (2012, 2013) has considered the effects of neoliberal policies on youth programs. Their research illuminated the increasing constraints on the culture of youth programs from ones began as culturally responsive and liberatory education contexts to ones that need to deliver top-down academic programming and goals (e.g. homework help, testing, attendance). With increasingly restrictive dollars tied to programmatic impositions, informal and authentic relationship building is being sidelined to meet requirements. Even when youth organizations are successful at securing steady funding, career stability (e.g. full-time work, salaries, and benefits) is typically only afforded to program directors or executive directors (Ellen Gannett, personal communication). However, reliance on external grants can make work precarity a reality for many in leadership and management as well.

Kalleberg (2009) argued that neoliberalism — the move toward market-driven and economic markers of success even within the public sector (e.g. education and medicine) — has changed the employer-employee relationship across these sectors. A few decades ago, people typically spent their careers within one organization. In our postmodern society, privatization has prevailed, and workers are often left without the means to organize or to protect their rights. Employers may even seek out contract workers as a way to ensure that employees cannot unionize (Kalleberg, 2009). Therefore, considering how youth workers navigate precarious work, and the implications of their persistence within financially insecure organizations, are vital framings for this study.

Occupational Identity Development

While precarity provides critical social and economic context of youth worker experience, I suggest that sociological and psychosocial dimensions of occupational identity can provide insights into how youth work persistence operates. Identity is shaped by macro structures as well as by the everyday culture of the workplace. Occupational identity, which refers to the evolving and changing social awareness and understanding of oneself as a worker, is an emergent concept in both sociological and psychosocial literature on identity (Brown, 1996; Christiansen, 1999; Phelan & Kinsella, 2009; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Occupational studies of identity formation and culture offer a way to consider practitioners' meaning making processes outside the boundaries of traditional professions. Across studies, a positive association with one's occupational identity has been linked to job satisfaction as well as personal wellbeing and life satisfaction (Chandler & Hall, 2005; Hirschi, 2012).

Although both sociologists and psychologists have examined occupational identity, this work has not always been bridged in the research. The idea of occupational identity formation relies on a critical underlying assumption in Western culture that there is both choice and agency in deciding one's work (i.e. work volition), and that there is an individual pursuit of *meaningful* work (Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). Because there is the assumption that young people have (some) choice and agency in Western contexts, along with the work-oriented adult culture of the U.S., occupational identity is an extremely salient identity development factor during the transition from adolescence into adulthood (Skorikov, 2007). Drawing on Erikson's early concepts of identity formation (1956, 1969), Jane Kroger and James Marcia (2011) have discussed how occupational and

ideological identity formation during adolescence follows phases of both “exploration” and “commitment” around both ideology and occupations.

Scholars in sociology and psychology suggest that occupational identity exploration begins during adolescence, in which youth are testing their sense of independence as well as multiple social identities. This seems particularly salient to youth workers’ trajectories, many who begin in this work as adolescents themselves. In his research on adolescent identity, James Marcia (1966) proposed four different states of identity: “foreclosed” identity, in which commitments to a particular identity are made without exploration of alternatives; a “moratorium” identity, in which a “crisis” has occurred but commitment is unclear and active exploration of alternative identities is occurring; “identity diffusion,” in which neither exploration nor commitment is occurring; and finally, “identity achievement,” which occurs when someone has experienced both exploration and some kind of “crisis” that has allowed them to feel fully invested in a chosen identity.

Work Meaningfulness: Jobs, Careers, and Callings

Occupational identity formation is also related to the different kinds of meaning that individuals place on their work, which can range from perceptions of their chosen work as a “job,” “vocation,” “calling” or “career” (Hirschi, 2012). Work meaning and distinctions between jobs, careers, vocations, and callings have important implications for issues of occupational identity and persistence in youth work, especially given questions and preexisting assumptions about youth work as either a vocation for youth workers typically under the age of thirty or as a “stepping stone” to other work (Baizerman, 1996; Fusco, 2012).

Work meaningfulness indicates the importance and significance of the work to an individual (Hirschi, 2012; Skorikov, 2008). When people perceive their work as a job, this means there is mainly a focus on either necessity or financial reward. Callings prioritize meaning and fulfillment and careers are conceived of as pathways around forms of growth and advancement (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Wrzesniewski and colleagues have suggested that the distinctions between job, careers, and callings can happen *within* an occupation and any can be connected to satisfaction; however, they note that, “[a]lthough one might expect to find a higher number of Callings among those in certain occupations, for example, teachers and Peace Corps employees, it is plausible that salespersons, medical technicians, factory workers, and secretaries could view their work as a Calling” (p. 22). These distinctions are important to consider in youth work persistence, particularly when it has been assumed that many people do not choose this work, but rather, resort to it. Researchers have also considered individuals’ current identification with the “meaningfulness” they associate with it in relationship to job satisfaction and organizational and career commitments (Hirschi, 2012; Rosso, Dekas, Wrzesniewski, 2010, p. 95).

These concepts, working meaningfulness and occupational identity, are connected to intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for the work (Skorikov, 2008). For those who are intrinsically motivated to engage in an occupation, they feel called to certain work and have a comfort with career stability as opposed to those who may be extrinsically motivated by traditional job advancement and related remuneration. Hirschi (2012) distinguished “work meaningfulness” from “callings;” whereas the former can be more about the importance of specific tasks of the particular job, callings indicate that the work

is “one’s purpose in life” (p. 480). Work as callings has features such as passion, commitment, and dedication that often require some melding of personal and professional life. Hirschi argued, “conceptually, callings should be regarded as an antecedent to work meaningfulness because callings provide a person with a sense of meaning and purpose in his or her work (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzensiewski, 2003), and thus enhance the perception of one’s work as meaningful” (p. 480). This means that the connections between callings, meaningfulness, and occupational identity development can be coherently linked.

Oftentimes terms such as “callings” and “vocation” are used interchangeably to describe a sense of purposeful and meaningful work. Historically, a calling was language originally used for people entering religious-based work, however, the definitions, application, and interpretations of this term have evolved, with different generational approach to its underlying meaning. Duffy and Dik (2009) explained:

Typically, the terms calling and vocation are used to refer to a sense of purpose or direction that leads an individual toward some kind of personally fulfilling and/or socially significant engagement with the work role, sometimes with reference to God or the divine, sometimes to a sense of passion or giftedness. (p. 427)

Whereas individuals who experience their work as a callings or vocations both commonly share the experience of deriving meaning and purpose from work and feel motivated by the relational aspects of the work (i.e. helping others), Bryan Dik and his colleagues in vocational psychology argue that callings include an external or broader purpose, “such as God, a family legacy, or a pressing societal need” (p. 625) that vocational pursuits don’t necessarily have.

Extrinsic Influences on Occupational Identity Development

Work choices, meaningfulness, and commitments do not just occur from personal exploration and decision-making in isolation. Rather, a range of extrinsic influences shape occupational identity exploration and formation. It is connected to opportunities and privileges afforded by access to extracurricular activities, family wealth, higher education, and exposure to diverse career paths. Skorikov and Vondracek (2011) explained:

On the one hand, occupational identity represents one's perception of occupational interests, abilities, goals, and values (Kielhofner, 2007). On the other hand, occupational identity represents a complex structure of meanings in which the individual links his or her motivation and competencies with acceptable career roles (Meijers, 1998).

Thus, occupational identity is connected to both internal processes of motivations, associations, judgment, beliefs and values, but is also responsive and related to external factors and pressures. That is to say, occupational identity, shaped by a sense of worth, dignity, and esteem, is also naturally connected to societal perceptions that influence those feelings. In the following subsections, I consider some of the literature that has explored these extrinsic influences on occupational identity development.

Social and Contextual Influences. As discussed earlier, youth work has been treated as a “semi-profession” — similar to caregiving work like nursing and home aides and also like public school teachers (Abbot & Meerabeau, 1998; Mehta, 2013). This accepted status marker and related marginalization impacts the ways in which society confers monetary value on youth work, and all of these influences shape a person's occupational

identity development. Sociologist Arlene Daniels has argued that prevailing “folk concepts” of work as only that which is hard, necessary, requires skills, and financially compensated has perpetuated divisions of what we conceive of as low and high status occupations as well as persistent invisibilization and devaluation of “women’s work” (domestic, emotional, relationship oriented) in contrast to public legitimacy of “men’s work” (outside the home, physical, or intellectual). Daniels wrote that understanding work “provides a clue to a person's worth in society — how others judge and regard him or her” (p. 404). She further commented:

To work — and earn money — is also to gain status as an adult. Thus, working is an important way to develop both a sense of identity and a sense of self-esteem. In this process, one not only comes to see oneself as an adult and a person of some worth; one comes to appreciate the larger normative order in which we participate. We earn our bread and work to keep society functioning at the same time. The value we place on this reproductive process shows how we participate in the moral order. (p. 404)

Daniels (1987) critiqued “common sense” notions of work, which typically masks the labor connected to family and community, such as developing relationships, providing care and support, planning public activities, and community organizing. In the past, women have often taken responsibility for these types of activities, which occur within both the public and private sphere, with little or no pay.

The precarity and invisibility of youth work can be compounded for women youth workers who confront sexism in the workplace and at home. Indeed, even in our current era, implicit gendered expectations around family-based work for women influence their

experiences of “enrichment” with outside work and “depletion” from family work (Rothbard, 2001). Hochschild (2003) has furthered this examination of invisible work through analyzing the expectation of emotional labor, and the exploitation of this type of work in service industries. However, emotional labor, rather than being an invisible byproduct, is quite central to care work and helping professions (Maslach, 2003). Considering how occupations are perceived are important in understand how and if youth workers’ construct an occupational identity.

Occupational identity development is affected by life circumstances, which may change or be distinct over the life course. Scholars Duffy and Dik (2009) defined “life circumstances” as “uncontrollable situations, events, and conditions” that are either serendipitous or detrimental and shape the choices that individuals can make about their careers. The authors see these circumstances as occurring at both societal and interpersonal scales in event size and impact. They found that even with internalized sense of goals for work, individuals may not be able to continue in chosen careers or decide to change their work course based on these circumstances. Large scale, natural disasters, intergenerational poverty, and racism can shape and change whole populations’ career paths. Personal injuries, the birth of a child, or a death in the family are also possible reasons why someone might change their occupation over their lifetime.

Organizational Influences. When considering organizational influences on occupational identity, there are often several coexisting and complementary types of occupational work occurring that also inform identity formation, occupational attachments, and commitments. For example, in both schools and community centers, there are often administrators, teachers, counselors, social workers, and custodians who all interact with

young people and their families (Intrator & Siegel, 2014; Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). In her study of the teaching profession, Susan Moore Johnson (1990) emphasized the important connection between workplace and occupational identity in her analysis. She put forth a set of “working conditions” that impact effective teaching practice, which included the physical, organizational, sociological, political, cultural, psychological, and educational features of a workplace. Positive occupational identity has implications beyond job satisfaction; it has been linked to both a sense of personal wellbeing and success in the workplace (Hirschi, 2012, Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011).

Organizational culture can also reproduce inequalities and reinforce hierarchies among occupations. Kalleberg (2009) believed that work precarity was revealed at the level of employer-employee relationship within organizations, which has become increasingly managerial and disassociated from workers’ rights in our current era. He discussed the varying impacts of this kind of work precarity on women and people of color, suggesting that the lack of workers’ rights or any kind of power for employees has a larger impact on women and people of color, who are already discriminated against in the workplace.

Familial and Interpersonal Influences. Scholars have also considered the powerful way that family members, particular parents, have on occupational identity formation. These pressures are particularly salient when individuals are younger and forming opinions and understanding of viable careers as well as when adults begin to have children (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011; Duffy & Dik, 2009; Vondracek, 1994). Duffy and Dik (2009) considered “family expectation and need” as one of the most influential forces on occupational identity development, particularly as it relates to both social pressures and

financial needs. The role of family perception and need became a salient external influence in my sample of persisters, both as related to the status of youth work, but also because of expectations that families had for the children to join a profession with higher pay.

Career Persistence and Career Changes

In considering youth workers' persistence, it is important to conceptualize what work looks like over time. There are quite a few folk conceptions about the amount of careers changes modern Americans make. However, there is no current consensus among scholars (in fields such as sociology, economics, management, and psychology) about what actually distinguishes a career change from a job change. This is why the Bureau of Labor Studies (BLS) has never documented career changes in their data on workforce trends. In their reasoning, they offered the example of a Bureau Labor Studies economist:

Take the case of a BLS economist who is promoted to a management position.

Before the promotion, she spent most of her time conducting economic research.

After the promotion to the management position, she still may conduct research, but she also spends much more time supervising staff and reviewing their research, managing her program's finances, and attending to a variety of other management tasks. This promotion represents an occupational change from economist to manager, but does it also represent a career change? It depends on how you define a career change. (BLS, FAQ)

Perhaps, then, it's not surprising that the research on career persistence is fairly limited in the U.S. In a study of "career changers" and "career persisters" in a diverse set of occupations in Australia, Ross (2007) found that changers were people who were

motivated by skill development and an ability to take risks, whereas persisters had greater job satisfaction and, interestingly, greater “career concerns” and worries about their work. Dlouhy and Biemann (2018) found, in their sample of German based professionals, it is difficult for people to change careers given the entrenchment of social networks and less time to explore different options; they observed that, “Over time, an individual acquires more and more human capital, and the opportunity costs of an occupational change increase; thus, the occupational career becomes increasingly locked in” (Dlouhy & Biemann, 2018, p.87).

While career change data is hard to find in the U.S., job change data is available. “younger baby boomer” generation has changed jobs an average of 12 times between the ages of 18 and 48 (Bureau of Labor Studies, 2015). This average has increased for Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) to an anticipated 15 job changes. These changes seem to be driven by economic forces rather than by generational changes in work culture. In fact, recent research shows that Millennials feel even more rooted and connected to their communities than previous generations and that the idea that Americans are job hopping any more than usual is a myth (Stone, 2018).

Issues of staff turnover and exits in the U.S. education sector have been most closely examined in teaching (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Ingersoll (2001) found that the supposed “teacher shortages” were actually being caused by organizational turnover and the “revolving door” effect rather than a scarcity of people interested in teaching. He argued that, rather than just focusing on recruitment via teacher preparation programs, schools as organizational structures needed to improve to retain teachers. In their study of an urban teacher cohort, Freedman

& Appleman (2009) found that there were other factors to consider in teacher retention, such as individual's sense of mission, a disposition toward hard work and persistence (that was cultivated within a teacher education program), rigorous and holistic preparation and ongoing training, a community and cohort culture, and flexibility in localized moves (within a district). Cochran-Smith and her colleagues (2012) also complicated policy narratives about teachers as "stayers" and "leavers," linking practice and quality to different types of decision-making in teaching. Across a sample of fifteen teachers, these research identified five "configurations" of trajectories in teaching that considered both teaching practice and longevity: (a) "going strong and staying on," "going strong but moving along," "middling, then moving," "falling short but hanging on," and "falling short and getting out." In their analysis, they challenge the homogenous categorization of exiters and persisters as well as the factors that play into career decisions.

Boundary Work in Occupational Identity Formation & Career Persistence

To illuminate various dimensions of occupational identity and the nature of persistence, probing at social boundaries helps to explain group membership as well as status and power within systems and institutions. Lamont and Molnar (2002) discussed the role of both "symbolic" and "social" boundaries that demarcate both cultural membership and exclusion across a variety of social institutions and systems. Identifying these boundaries and demarcations are critical in understanding identity. Boundary work illuminated the tensions that arise when persisters perceived the purpose of their work quite differently from the systems they were a part of in doing youth work. A "boundaryless career," as defined by Arthur (1994) was a concept utilized to explain how

people defined their jobs in the modern era. In contrast to “traditional careers” in which people would stay in one organization for their lives, moved up the ladder based on age, and felt a sense of loyalty to the company mission, Arthur (1994) argued for newer understandings of “boundaryless careers,” in which people found work validation outside of organizations and employers, frequently hopped across jobs, and developed networks to sustain their interests. A few years later, Arthur & Rousseau (1996) further expanded their definitions of boundaryless careers as follows:

"The most prominent of these is a case where a career, like the stereotypical Silicon Valley career, moves across the boundaries of separate employers.

A second meaning occurs when a career, like that of an academic or a carpenter, draws validation—and marketability—from outside the present employer.

A third meaning is involved when a career, like that of a real-estate agent, is sustained by external networks or information.

A fourth meaning occurs when traditional organizational career boundaries, notably those involving hierarchical reporting and advancement principles, are broken.

A fifth meaning occurs when a person rejects existing career opportunities for personal or family reasons.

A sixth meaning depends on the interpretation of the career actor, who may perceive a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints.” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p.6)

In this new definition, boundaryless careers were operationalized in many different ways. Within this career construction, as defined above, “job hopping” becomes a routine way

of developing a career identity. Boundaryless constructions were also employed by people to envision futures when there were structural constraints, and the meaningfulness of the job was constructed outside of employers. These particular meanings are salient to the experiences of persisters.

Conclusion

In this review, I tied together the existing literature on youth worker demographics, why they leave and stay in the field, the debates about professionalization (both as a process and as a potential outcome) as a possible solution to issues of identity and early exits, and current research on youth worker occupational identity. I show that the nature of persistence is both complicated and difficult to discern within this research, with only recent research exploring the impact of neoliberal and managerial logics on youth workers (Baldrige, 2014, 2019; Fusco et al., 2013; McLaughlin, 2018).

Because past empirical research has yet to full explore the links between occupational identity and persistence in youth work, I bridge sociological and psychosocial theories on occupations to consider this phenomenon. The concepts of occupational identity development, work meaningfulness, career change, and boundary work — as situated in work precarity — offer important lenses for interpretations of youth work persisters' meaning making and experiences. Utilizing this occupational framework, I consider how intrinsic motivations and extrinsic influences — both positive and negative — shape the nature of youth workers' identities and persistence in this study within the context of precarious work.

Chapter 3: Methods

Research Questions

To build on these three bodies of literature: (1) recruitment and retention studies on youth workers (2) research on youth workers' occupational identities, and (3) sociological and psychosocial literature on work and occupations, this dissertation addresses these questions:

How do practitioners who continue in the field of youth work understand and describe their occupational identity and its role in their persistence in this work?

1. What intrinsically motivates experienced youth workers' entry and persistence?

How do these motivations shape their occupational identity?

2. What social conditions and barriers continually challenge their persistence? What strategies do they employ to cope with or mitigate these challenges?
3. What extrinsic factors and supports encourage occupational identity development and persistence?

To answer these questions, I conducted 44 interviews with 20 youth workers who had worked in the field for five or more years in a metropolitan area in the Northeast. This study — including my approach to sampling, interviewing, and analysis — was guided by narrative inquiry, a phenomenological methodology that centers individuals' meaning making of identity and lived experience.

In this chapter, I begin by discussing my epistemological and methodological choices as informed by my research questions. I then share my participant selection process and introduce the sample of youth work “persisters,” describing key information about sample composition. I then delve into the specifics of conducting life-story

interviewing, explaining the design of the interview protocol, the process and experience of interviewing and field visits, and the ways in which I collected data. This is followed by a discussion of my process of analysis, my researcher identity, and considerations of validity. I conclude with reflections from this research process.

Research Methodology & Design

A Critical Realist Paradigm

To best answer my research questions about occupational identity and persistence, I approached the construction and interpretation of knowledge through the lens of critical realism (Maxwell, 2013). As a paradigm, critical realism offers a way to interpret personal motivations, understandings of self, and lived experience as contextualized and in conversation with key social and structural phenomena. Critical realism combines ontological realism (e.g. there are social structures that should be accounted for beyond personal beliefs and perspectives) and epistemological constructivism (i.e. knowledge is subjective, and the creation of “findings” is through interaction between interviewer and interviewee) (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Whereas constructivists stay close to interviewer and interviewees’ interpretations of meaning, critical theorists consider power dynamics and social contexts, with attentiveness to a variety of political and social forces both in framing and analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 2014). The critical realist paradigm bridges the underlying assumptions of constructivism with insights from critical theory, offering an “emancipatory” framework in which I, as the researcher, framed questions, engaged in interviewing, and analyzed participants’ understandings of their world as they view it, while also interpreting their experiences as contextualized by structural forces and systems (Oliver, 2011). Therefore, while I highlighted individual narratives of identity

construction and personal meaning making, I also connected these subjective experiences to broader societal narratives and experiences documented in empirical and theoretical scholarship (Bruner, 1991).

It is important to note that I was not alone in making broader connections to structures and systems. Many of the youth workers I interviewed drew on critical perspectives in their meaning making about their persistence. They were well versed in a range of critical thought. This was evident in their narrations of personal, professional, and academic experiences. Research participants brought historical, educational, ecological, developmental, and sociological knowledge into the interviews, acknowledging and explicitly addressing issues of race, class, gender, status, and power in relation to how they were perceived and how they moved through the world as professionals. Therefore, even in my critical analysis, my participants became co-constructors of this kind of knowledge through interpreting their personal experiences and affirming or pushing against my hunches through each of our interviews together.

Narrative Inquiry as Methodology

My epistemological approach of critical realism works in concert with my methodology of narrative inquiry. A phenomenological methodology, narrative inquiry has been utilized across the social sciences to facilitate researchers' interpretations of research participants' life stories "as told" (i.e. constructivist approaches) and to critically unpack the construction of these stories as well as situated in historical and structural contexts (i.e. critical theory approach) (Kramp, 2003; Silver, 2011). To answer questions about identity and persistence, narrative inquiry maps onto a critical realist approach; it allows for movement between individual realities and meaning making as well as

contextual dynamics of social inequality. In particular, this methodology focuses on elements of “retrospective meaning making” from the perspective of the interviewee as “protagonist” of the phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 64). It has diverse disciplinary roots, one that “borders and draws on scholarship and methodology from anthropology, history, and literary theory” (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, &, McSpadden, 2011, p. 63). Narrative research is grounded in the theory and philosophy of scholars such as anthropologists Bakhtin and Geertz; feminist theorists and social psychologists such as Fine and Gilligan; and psychology theorists Polkinghorne, Bruner, Josselson, and McAdams (Wertz et al., 2011).

Narrative inquiry offers a way to find collective meaning through appreciation and centrality of subjectivity, while also accounting for how these stories are situated within social and structural context. This framing is particular important to my research when understanding youth workers’ motivations, decision making, and experience of work events as framed by precarious work. Ultimately, the paradigm of narrative inquiry provided me with a framework to analyze (1) individual cases of identity and persistence and (2) salient cross-case themes (Creswell, 2013).

To engage in this methodology, I adapted the “life-story” interview method to capture youth workers’ narration of their work histories (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). This interviewing method involved asking about a range of life events to understand how people make sense of and retell their life stories. McAdams (1996) has written, “A life story is a psychosocial construction. This means that although the story is constructed by the person whose story it is, the story has its constitutive meanings within culture” (p. 307). Through life-story interviewing, I delved into both the individual and personal

aspects of meaning making while also staying attentive to the known context of field precarity and occupational marginalization.

Sample Selection Process

I recruited participants through a process known as “snowball sampling” (Weiss, 1994), in which I first interviewed youth workers whom I knew through professional and personal connections. I then reached out to individuals based on these initial participants’ recommendations. Snowball sampling is a common sociological and anthropological method of research recruitment, particularly for interview and case-based methods. To develop information-rich cases, I created an initial list of research aligned selection criteria, which I shared in an introductory email to prospective interviewees. These original parameters were meant to ensure consistency and bounded diversity in my sample.

The search for participants that met my original criteria (youth workers over thirty who had five or more years of experience in direct-service work) offered critical preliminary findings and informed my sampling criteria. Over time, I made changes to this criteria based on the snowball sampling process and what it uncovered. Below, I share my reasoning for this sampling. I explain how the actual process of identifying participants became a preliminary set of findings and describe the changes that I made to my sampling criteria based on this new knowledge.

To answer my original research questions, I sought practitioners who served youth ages 12-21 within cities. Whereas the terms “school-age” care and “afterschool” practitioner are typically associated with those working with children, ages 5-12, “youth worker” is a moniker typically used to describe practitioners working with adolescents,

ages 12-21 in opt-in programs in cities and high poverty neighborhoods (Yohalem & Pitmann, 2006; Fusco, 2012). Through my initial email outreach through both personal networks and online forums, I realized that it was more important for my participants to identify themselves as youth workers, and that I was not imposing this word or term on participants. This was important because, as I learned early on from conversations with participants, the use of this term varies greatly.

Here, I will share the example of my preliminary interactions with Claire, a 37 year-old White youth worker, who found my definition of youth work as “those who primarily work in out-of-school time programs” as a limiting one. She understood youth work as a set of practices that could happen in a variety of settings. For her, being a youth worker was a philosophical approach to be youth-centered. This is aligned with more contemporary research on youth work (Fusco, 2018). My initial phone conversation with Claire made me realize that I was also interested in how youth workers defined the occupation in their own words, and that I may be limiting my sample based on prescribed explanations.

Relatedly, I also had tried to limit my sample to youth workers working in community schools, nonprofit-based youth programs, and community street outreach. This sampling initially excluded case-workers, residential care workers, and museum educators because of their distinct organizational contexts and the body literature to which I am adding, which focuses more on community centers (Baldrige, 2014; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Travis, Jr., 2010). I tried to maintain consistency in this context aspect, particularly seeking out youth workers who were working in community-based organizations vs. school-based settings. However, in learning about participants’ work

histories, I learned that many of my research participants had at some point worked in schools (in student support centers, for example), in case work, and had also worked with children and youth across the age spectrum. Therefore, even though I had aimed for bounded representation, understanding work across the life course meant embracing the fluidity of contexts in which youth workers worked over the years.

To capture occupational identity formation over time, I chose to interview youth workers across the life course. I had originally sought youth workers who worked in the field for five years or more and, ideally, were over the age of 30 at the start of the interview. My initial reasoning for this criteria was that people ages 18 to 30 change jobs an average of 7 times (Bureau of Labor & Statistics, 2015), and young adults often test and try out different types of work, adapting through a process of observing role models, experimenting with “provisional” versions of their work identity, and assessing their roles through internal and external feedback (Ibarra, 1999). Additionally, recruiting participants who had five years of experience in their late twenties or older was an attempt to capture a demographic that has continued in the field beyond a time of anticipated occupational flux within youth work (Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006). Previous surveys have indicated that youth workers desire to stay in the field for at least five more years, but also that there is a dip in age representation of youth workers in their thirties and forties, speculated to be due to the need to financially support growing families (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). In identifying youth workers for this study, I learned that, just as these surveys had predicted, it was very difficult to identify youth workers in their thirties who had not already exited youth work or had transitioned into nonprofit management roles that did not include direct work with young people. I also

found that several youth workers had already worked for four to five years in their early to mid twenties, as opposed to in their 30s, as my initial criteria required. Therefore, I lowered my age criteria to include youth workers in their mid-twenties.

Because I had trouble identifying “persisters” who stayed in frontline work, I decided to include program directors who engaged in both direct-service work and staff supervision. To a certain extent, the original criteria in this area remained the same. However, when youth workers were the founders of a program that grew over several years, and they still identified as youth workers, I made exceptions. For the youth workers in their late forties and early fifties, organizational management, staff supervision, and fundraising were part of the story of career trajectories in this field. Finally, my sample included youth workers who worked in a variety of content areas (e.g. arts, college access, sports, and leadership). This was intentional, as I wanted to learn if there youth workers’ prioritized the content area or the relationships developed with young people. For example, I was curious if youth workers who were also artists felt that youth work was a way to pay the bills and art was their primary passion.

While a “purposive sample” intends to capture a small, representative sample of a population, a full population study of youth workers does not exist. Therefore, I tried to create a representative sample based on some identified patterns in subsamples (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Yohalem & Pitmann, 2006). I sought to achieve racial and gender diversity in this selection process, with the recognition that age and years in the field already narrowed my sample substantially.

Once I reconfigured my sampling criteria based on these initial findings, I began interviewing the first few youth workers. I utilized “case logic,” also known as

Sequential Interviewing (Small, 2009), to determine which youth workers to subsequently interview and further develop my sample. I approached each individual interview as a narrative “case” to interpret and understand along the way. Based on participants’ recommendations, as well as through thematic notes and memos, I sought to interview people who offered different perspectives and variation. When certain patterns began to emerge around key events of entry and persistence, I determined that I had reached case “saturation” (Small, 2009). This is a qualitative signal that key themes and ideas were repeatedly represented and confirmed by additional interview participants.

Meet the *Persisters*: Sample Composition

From June of 2017 until May of 2018, I identified and interviewed twenty youth workers for this study, who met the aforementioned selection criteria. These research participants all worked in a metropolitan region in the Northeastern U.S. In this study, I used pseudonyms for names of participants, cities, and organizations to protect their identities as current employees. Interview participants also had the option of choosing their own pseudonyms, and, when possible, I aimed to respect their requests. At the time of the interview, all youth workers who participated in the study had 4.5 or more years of experience in the field. These youth workers worked in a variety of organizational settings, such as community-based centers, housing authority affiliated programs, schools, and independent youth programs. All of them worked in nonprofit organizations or government affiliated public organizations. To express my gratitude for those who participated in these long-form interviews, some of which typically took 3 to 4 hours to complete, I sent \$40 Amazon gift cards at the end of the interview process. In this

section, I describe who my research participants were through demographic and organizational information.

In Table 1, below, I highlight key information about my sample. This table includes youth workers' pseudonyms, their current job titles and organizational affiliations, their years of work experience, and their ages at the time of the interview.

Table 1. Youth Workers' Jobs, Years of Experience, Age at Time of Interviews (n=20)

<i>Name</i>	Current Job Title	Organizational Affiliation*	Years working with youth:	Age:
<i>Nate</i>	Program Manager	NetPositive	4.5	26
<i>Ernesto</i>	Teacher-Counselor	Future Ready in Adin (FRIA)	5	24
<i>Christina</i>	Education Director	Catherine OurHouse	6	29
<i>Aminata</i>	Youth Development Specialist	Glasford Farm4Justice	7	25
<i>Josué</i>	Teen Program Director	Adin Youth Programs (AYP)	8	31
<i>Rika</i>	Education Consultant (Part-Time)	Eliot OurHouse	10	29
<i>Carlos</i>	Spoken Word Educator	ModernArt Consortium (MAC) Museum	10	30
<i>Gerard</i>	Academic Coach	CollegeBright	10	31
<i>Thien</i>	Supervisor	Glasford DreamBig	10	33
<i>Pablo</i>	Painting Mentor (Part-Time)	CityVisions	11	35
<i>Ollie</i>	Youth Media	Our Neighborhood	12	28

	Program Director	Productions (ONP)		
<i>Xiomara</i>	Artistic Director	Lift Our Voices (Eliot) LOV(E)	12	31
<i>Derrick</i>	Program Director	Winterton YouthActNow	13	35
<i>Genevieve</i>	Teacher-Counselor	Future Ready in Adin (FRIA)	16	35
<i>Claire</i>	Youth Development Program Director	Centro de Bellas Artes	18	37
<i>Sam</i>	Regional Director	Glasford Farm4Justice	20	36
<i>Nicole</i>	Director of Programs	Adin Service Learning House	20	37
<i>Omar</i>	Executive Director	Pontu Cape Verde	25	48
<i>Emilia</i>	Program Director	Glasford DreamBig	30	50
<i>Rose</i>	Director of Education	Wheatley OurHouse	31	53

**At time of interview*

Social Demographics

Youth workers shared their social demographic information through an online survey. Of these interview participants, 11 identified as women and 9 as men. Of the 11 women, 1 person indicated their gender expression as femme. Based on available national demographic data of youth workers in cities, this sample has a slight over-representation of men. Seven participants identified as White, six identified as Black (with self reported inclusion of countries of origin, i.e. Haiti, Jamaica, Sierra Leone, Cape

Verde), four as Latino/Latinx, two as Asian, and 1 as Multiracial (Asian and White).

More than half of the interview participants identified as first or second-generation immigrants from countries such as Haiti, Vietnam, Taiwan, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Cape Verde. In interviews, youth workers of color and white youth workers talked about how their race/ethnicity shaped both their experiences growing up and how they connected to young people.

I did not collect survey data on youth workers' current or childhood class background. However, based on my interviews, I learned that more than half of the youth workers in my sample came from low-income, working class, and lower middle class backgrounds and a smaller group grew up in middle or upper middle-class households. No one explicitly shared having access to intergenerational wealth such as trust funds or access to free housing (other than their parents' home). Through interviews, class status was discussed as a fluid category. It changed over time for participants throughout their lives, based on parents' income, partner income, raising children, job changes, and the impact of student loans and rising housing costs. For example, for Sam, a Taiwanese-American youth worker, described how his family went from an upper middle-class life in the Midwest to a low-income household during his teen years in the aftermath of a fire that burned down his family's restaurant. Gerard, an African-American youth worker who grew up in a dual-income professional middle-class household, felt that his perspectives and insights were shaped by where he grew up, in particular his experiences with childhood friends from low-income households who lived in his economically diverse neighborhood. Participants like Pablo, Genevieve, Rika, and Nicole grew up in city-owned affordable housing units. Race and class-based narratives as related to

families — aspirations for economic mobility, maintenance of professional status, and desires to give back to particular community or city — were common threads among several youth workers I interviewed (see Starr, 2003).

Participants' Employment and Organizational Settings

As discussed in more detail later, more than half of youth workers in this sample had moved between organizations every few years, from school-based youth programs and local community centers, to afterschool programs in affordable housing projects and locally based national networks of programs. In Appendix A, I provide a table to show where youth workers were working at the time of interviewing. Most of my participants were working as full time youth workers during the time of our interview; only 2, Rika and Pablo, were in part-time positions.

Identifying a sample of youth workers from diverse work contexts and content areas helped to answer questions around collective and common identity and commitment *across* these contexts. However, differences emerged between organizations with youth-centered missions and those that offered an array of community social services. As discussed in my empirical and theoretical framework, racism and ageism particularly played out in programs that were part of charity-based and adult-based organizations, such as ones connected to the housing authority and broader faith-based social services. Youth workers expressed that they felt that their youth programs were a line item or a tax write-off rather than a central mission of larger organizations. Practitioners who worked in local, regional, or national youth program at times expressed a similar form of disrespect and marginalization, but it was typically related to financial compensation and promotion, and, at other times, a disconnect between managers and development vs.

direct-service staff. Table 2, below, demonstrates the different types of organizational employment, as indicated in interviews.

Table 2: Types of Organizational Employment

Current Type of Organizational Employment	Number of Organizational Type Represented in Sample
Community Based Centers and Organizations (Youth Services is One Branch of Work)	7
City, Regional, or National Network of Youth Programs	9
Independent Local Youth Program	4

Content delivery and approaches to youth varied in these programs as well. All of these organizations had either a positive youth development (Lerner, Lerner, & Benson, 2011) or social justice youth development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) approach in their work with young people. Many organizations followed a “garden-variety” club model, which Hirsch (2005) defined as “comprehensive youth development sites, offering activities in many areas including recreation, academic support, psychoeducational programs, arts, computers, field trips for cultural enrichment, entrepreneurship (including fundraising), dances, movies, and so on” (p. 10). With this in mind, many youth workers understood themselves as “generalists” in youth development support. The primary medium of this kind of youth support varied. Some youth workers had more experience with physical activities and sports (e.g. Nate, Claire, Derrick, Aminata, Sam, and Gerard) whereas others were distinctly arts and social justice-based through music, poetry, painting, and film (e.g. Carlos, Xiomara, Ollie, Derrick) and another set focused on academic enrichment, college prep, work skills, and social and emotional support (e.g. Nicole, Gerard, Christina, Genevieve, Ernesto, and Thien). Many practitioners had

knowledge, experience, and agility to engage in all sets of activities, but they were also concurrently supervising other staff across these areas of content delivery (e.g. Josué, Emilia, Claire, Rose, Omar, Sam, and Rika). Therefore, most of these youth workers described their roles as educators, mentors, and connectors, as necessary in these kinds of programs (Noam & Yamashiro, 2013).

Persisters in this sample were primarily working with adolescents who were offered part-time employment or stipends to participate in these programs. This is a fairly common practice among youth development organizations in urban centers, to ensure they can afford to participate and to offer an incentive (Intrator & Siegel, 2014). Therefore, youth workers also took on roles as employers of young people in these work-ready program models. Processes of hiring and firing of adolescents occurred in these programs. Youth workers navigated this binary, the positive youth development philosophy as well as the employment model, simultaneously. This additional role was necessary given the financial circumstances of the youth that they worked with and the need to offer payment to make programming an affordable opportunity for youth.

Youth Populations Served

All but one of the youth workers I interviewed worked with youth in 9th-12th grade age range. The exception, Thien, had primarily worked with youth in middle school (6-8th grade). Several youth workers indicated they had also worked across age groups over the years, including K-5 age children and youth ages 18-21. Seven participants explicitly wrote into the survey or indicated in our interview they had worked with immigrant youth. Several shared either generalities or specifics, such as working with youth “across difference,” LGBTQIA youth, youth who lived in affordable housing

and who were from low-income backgrounds, youth of color, adjudicated, gang-affiliated, and youth from single parent homes. One participant, Xiomara, indicated that she worked with “youth poets (even the ones that don't think so yet),” speaking to particular goals and interests of young people in her program, Lift Our Voices Eliot.

Participants' Ages & Years of Experience

While some practitioners had four or five years of experience in the field, others had over fifteen. Everyone in this sample had worked in youth work for a minimum of four and a half years at the start of the interviewing process. Fifteen of the youth workers I interviewed reported that they had ten or more years working with youth (see Figure 1).

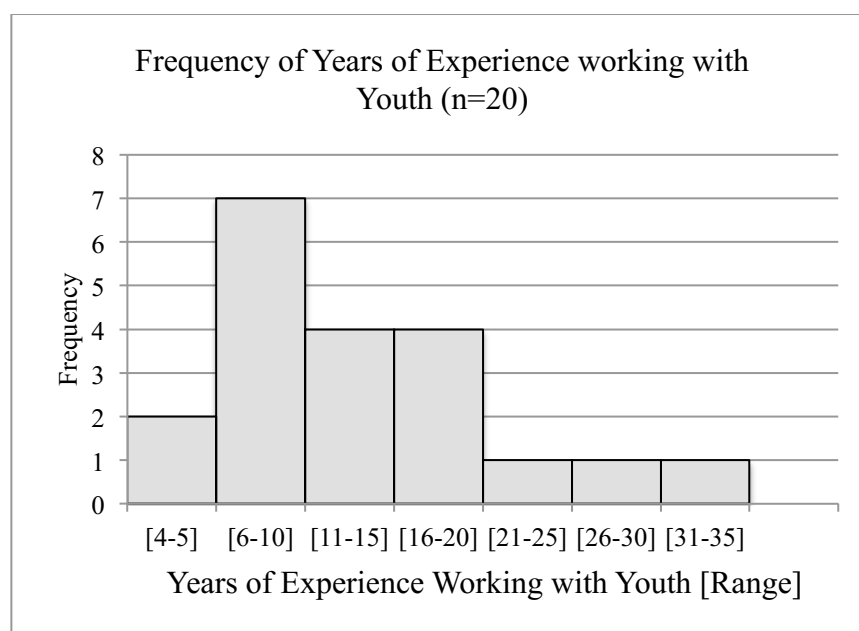


Figure 1. Youth Workers' Years of Experience in the Field: Frequency (n=20)

I also learned that many began working as youth workers *as youth themselves* in a variety of youth leadership programs at summer camps and afterschool programs. Interestingly, youth workers in their twenties already felt that they had experienced trials and tests of their commitment, and many felt that there was so much to still learn in these roles. It appeared that some of participants included this information in their years of

experience, whereas older youth workers tended to leave these early youth work years out in their calculations of years in the field. Years in the field were better understood through the format of life-story interviews as opposed to the background survey data.

Most persisters in this sample were representative of the “Millennial” generation (born 1981-1996) and “Gen X” (1965-1980). These youth workers ranged in age from 24 to 53, with half of my interviewees reporting between the ages of 31 and 40 (situating them in an “older Millennial” or “younger Gen X” realm) (see Figure 2, below). Youth workers who were in their mid thirties discussed their experience with the Great Recession as part of their work trajectory and described their navigation of choosing work they cared about most in the face of layoffs and downsizing across sectors. They felt most at a crossroads in their commitments particularly when figuring out how to support their family or anticipating having children. Persisters also shared the ways in which gentrification affected their ability to stay local and flexible about their housing needs. Finally, the few youth workers in this study who were in their late forties and early fifties and were in leadership roles, reflected on their journey in parallel to the history of youth work professionalization. They also wondered out loud about their younger staff, who had not yet secured highly coveted “program director” roles.



Figure 2. Youth Workers' Ages (n=20)

Participants' Level of Education

At the time of data collection, two participants had taken some college courses, two held an associates degree, eight had acquired a bachelor's degree, and eight had attained a masters (in fields such as education, social work, and public health). It should be noted that not all youth workers in the U.S. have formal degrees or certifications (Baldrige, 2018; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006), rather, unique community expertise qualifies them for the work. It is also important to note that for many of my participants, the attainment of the bachelor's and master's degrees was not a continuous experience. For some, attaining the bachelor's degree took several years to complete, as family, financial, and work related challenges prolonged their educational advancement. As seen in Appendix B, youth workers oftentimes changed their majors several times, at first to appease their parents' desires for upward social mobility, and ultimately to find a degree that matched their personal aspirations and interests.

Interviewing Method: Design and Process

As discussed previously, to engage in narrative inquiry, I conducted “life story” interviews, which focus on eliciting individuals’ narration of their lives through a recounting of and reflection on key life experiences (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; McAdams, 1996; Seidman, 2006). This kind of interviewing illuminates both individual and collective narratives of social identity and context (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Bruner, 1991; Gonzales, 2016; Rios, 2011). In my study, I focused primarily on participants’ occupational histories — their working years — through sequential, thematic question prompts. Self-narratives are particularly critical when people reflect on work transitions (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), which many individuals in my sample were wrestling with during our interviews. In this section, I detail the process of interviewing, also describing the ways in which I built trust and rapport over time through this multi-step process.

I began my interviews with an email invitation and phone call (see Appendix C). Based on participant interest expressed via email, I shared an initial consent form (see Appendix D) and asked each prospective interviewee to complete a background survey that I created on Google forms (see Appendix E). The background survey captured basic demographic information (e.g. age, race/ethnicity, highest level of education) and relevant contextual information about their youth work experience (e.g. years working with youth, populations served, current organizational affiliation, and current job title). I then set up an introductory phone call to further explain my research project, answered any questions and concerns, and scheduled the first interview.

Phone calls were part of my effort to build trusting relationships with interview participants. These initial conversations allowed me to hear more about why prospective

participants were interested in the study, and they could also learn more about why I was interested in this topic based on my personal history as a youth worker and researcher of out-of-school time programs. I also used these phone calls to assure participants of their anonymity if this was a primary concern for them. While some participants expressed reluctance, many were excited for the opportunity to talk about their work lives. Depending on participants' schedules, I set up additional time before or after interview times for program tours and observations.

This was not a cookie-cutter interview process; it depended on youth workers' varying requests for privacy and anonymity during interviews as well as the level of loquaciousness in work-life storytelling. However, the Figure 3, below, shares a general sequence that I followed for interviewing.

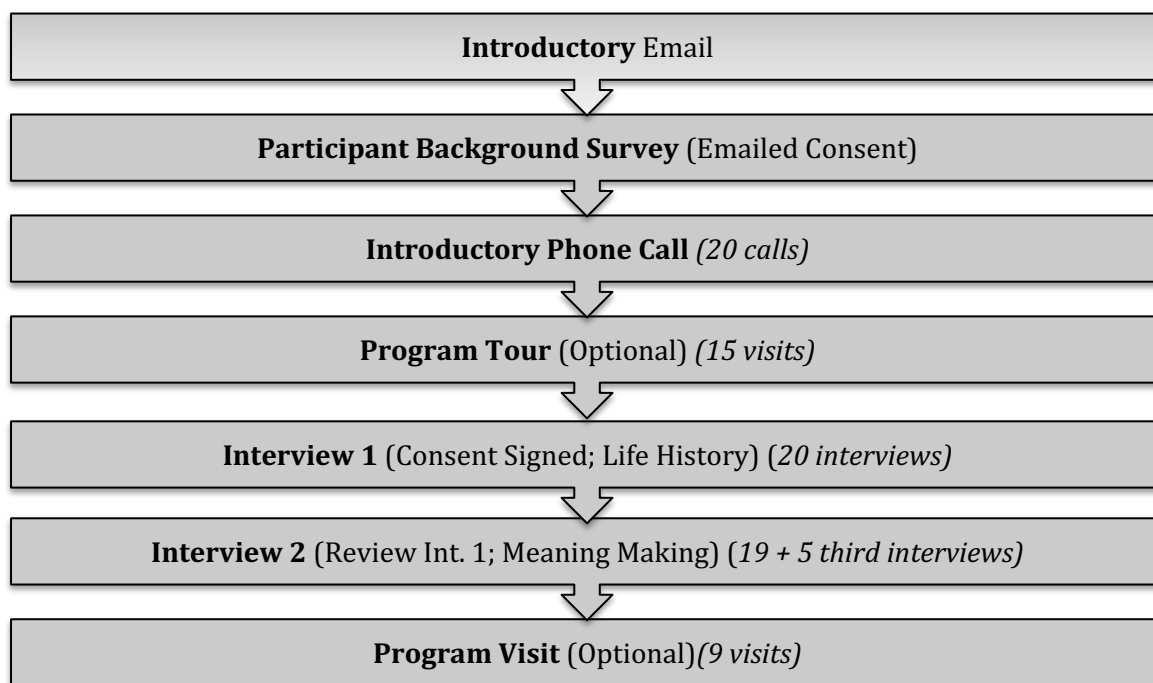


Figure 3. Interview and Fieldwork Process

Interview Protocol

I developed a semi-structured interview protocol to ensure responses about occupational identity and persistence (See Appendix F). To capture these concepts, I utilized a theoretical framework for occupational identity (Anteby, Chan, DeBenigno, 2016). I generally followed the chronological logic of life-story interviews to focus on stories of *becoming* a youth worker, experiences of *doing* the work, and understandings of *relating* to others. As a warm up question, I began by asking about participants' current jobs and for a description of what a day at work looked like for them. I then asked some personal background questions about youth workers' childhoods. In particular, I was curious about their stories of schooling and out-of-school time program participation, as well as their closeness to parents and siblings. I then segued into questions about entry and socialization into youth work. I asked participants about their first jobs and their entry into youth work. I asked for them to recount significant work events, people, supports, challenges, learning, and senses of self that they developed in those positions (see Crossley, 2001).

I concluded with questions that considered their work identity in relation to colleagues, teachers, as well as their own families and friends. I wanted to examine both how youth workers felt that they were perceived and their work to partner and build relationships with youth, families, teachers, and community members. These "relating" questions also focused on narrations of status as informed by the work of Michèle Lamont, who "probed systematically about "boundary work" (a type of behavior), which people typically do not know they produce, although they do so constantly (when describing who they are similar to and different from, respect or look down upon, etc.)" (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 161). Finally, I asked interview participants to share their

future orientations, their advice to entry-level youth workers, and what they would hope their youth would say about them (see Appendix E for full interview script). While I mainly followed a structured interview, I also attended to the interpersonal dynamics of in-depth interviews by asking follow-up questions and inviting further thoughts on different topics of personal importance to the interview participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

Timelines

As a supplement to this semi-structured interview protocol, I utilized a timeline tool to guide conversations and invoke participant's memories (Adriansen, 2012). I provided a large piece of paper and colorful markers for participants to indicate significant personal and work life events. In my first few interviews, I followed my interview script closely, asking interviewees to use specific markers for specific memories. However, I realized that for some of my participants, the timeline was more distracting, whereas for others, it allowed them to concentrate. I eventually stopped giving instructions about marker colors and allowed participants to organically engage in the timeline construction as based on personal preference. While I generally aimed for a sequential retelling of work journeys, the timeline allowed me to be attentive to the interests of the interviewee as well as discontinuities in these narratives (Bruner, 1991; Bateson, 1989). This meant that I invited participants to share their feelings about particular work episodes, as well as return to or "skip" between events in their description of their work history. The timeline facilitated this movement across stories and served as a visual "'collective memory,' where the story can be seen both by the interviewer and the interviewee" (Adriansen, p. 48). I treated timelines as similar to field notes, not

displayed here for the reader, but rather, utilized as a data collection tool to be described in my analysis.

The timeline became a shared roadmap during many of our interviews. In particular, it allowed me, as the interviewer, to re-enter second interviews with ease, as I scanned my eyes across the events and recounted previous conversations. For example, in my second meeting with Carlos, I pointed to each event we talked about in our first interview, and the ways in which he described key, meaningful events in his life. He shook his head in disbelief: “That sounds so wild to hear someone else say my whole life. Like, Oh my God yeah. That's true. That's great!” While this kind of recall could have occurred through notes as well, there was something evocative about visual representation of people’s lives; it became the material manifestation of our co-constructed meaning making.

Program Tours and Site Visits

As part of this study, I asked each participant to provide a tour of the program or neighborhood in which they worked. In total, I went on 15 program tours. Many shared pride and enthusiasm in giving me an initial tour, and it offered an important window into their work lives. Some programs were fairly small and did not require a tour per say. For example, Genevieve’s program was inside a high school. It was a set of two connected classrooms. On these tours and program visits, I would often meet young people and colleagues. Some youth workers who were busy mentoring or supervising prior to the interview invited their youth participants to show me around the program, while others did not have just one office space to show — rather, they moved between different schools and programs in their roles and invited me to visit one of their program locations.

A few youth workers were very clear that they did not want to meet or be interviewed at their place of work based on concerns about their privacy in the interview process.

Interviewing at program sites and neighborhood locations, whether in a private office, a hectic shared space amidst the preparations for youth arrivals in the afternoon, or at a nearby café, offered important starting points for conversations. Program and neighborhood settings evoked participants' memories and feelings about their work with young people, colleagues, supervisors, and employees; when in their offices or program sites, they would share and point out photos and news clippings on their walls as reference points for youth that they mentored and events they had organized. It was clear that youth workers were deeply situated in local ecosystems, as community members, colleagues, and former youth would regularly walk in and out of program spaces as neighbors might do, poking their heads in to say hello, drop off flyers, or give a hug. Observations from these program and neighborhood visits provided additional information for my analysis, as these contexts are "microgeographies" rife with information about participants' lives (e.g. photos, posters, program flyers, everyday interactions with colleagues) (Elwood & Martin; 2000).

For some research participants, who preferred to be interviewed outside of their place of work (or did not have one central work location), our locations varied from bustling local cafes, public libraries with community rooms, a bench near a series of participant-created murals, to a picnic table by a large kettle pond. These non-program settings mattered as well, in part because of the reasoning behind chosen locations and also because of the different kinds of conversations one can have when outside of the workplace. As an example, my second meeting with Pablo was at the high school he was

going to join as a full-time art teacher. This was the high school that he attended and one that displayed several outdoor collaborative murals he had worked on more recently as a local artist. Changing our first interview location at his current youth program, CityVisions, to the location of his next workplace was personally and professionally meaningful for him. For Christina, her choice to meet by her favorite pond demonstrated a need to reflect on her journey with a different view than her workplace, especially given her uncertainty about continuing in youth work.

Non-program locations were also helpful in relationship building. Enjoying a conversation over coffee or a meal, while learning about new places from my participants helped me develop camaraderie with participants while also illuminating local connections and affections for their communities. I also observed that youth workers, even the most candid and open participants, opened up even more about challenges and barriers to their work when there was more privacy or neutrality in our location. Ultimately, each location provided a unique entry point into the conversation during interviews.

Finally, to learn more about youth workers' experiences, I also observed 9 special events and regular program days. These program visits gave me an opportunity to meet persisters' youth participants and colleagues. While coordinating visits was not always possible (especially for interviewees who preferred not to have their supervisors know who I was), I was still able to attend a variety of events. I visited a youth-led police dialogue event in Winterton YouthActNow facilitated by Derrick, a "life after high school" panel coordinated by Rika, an evening of preparations for a family day at Adin Youth Programs with Josué, and a youth leadership training led by Xiomara. I moved

crates of honey jars with Sam at Farm4Justice for a local farmers market in Glasford, and hung out behind the set of an Our Neighborhood Productions youth-directed film. These visits exposed me to completely different sides of youth workers than our long-form interviews. I got to see their faces lighting up when greeting youth and colleagues and the manifestation of their beliefs in action.

Data Collection Instruments

On program visits and observations, I recorded field notes in a journal. I later typed up these observations into a narrative of the experience (see Appendix G). I recorded interviews on multiple devices: Quicktime and GarageBand on my laptop and a handheld digital recorder. Additionally, I took photos of the paper timelines. To remember details, I took notes during initial phone conversations, tracked key quotes or ideas, and typed up descriptions of each participant based on written field notes. I would also write thematic memos (e.g. research identity, sampling, building relationships, precarious work). I kept track of these smaller documents using the Microsoft software program, OneNote. With funding support from the Dean's dissertation fellowship, interviews were transcribed through a professional service, Rev.com, and re-read and edited by me for accuracy.

Because I was often driving an hour or more to participants' programs or interview locations, I would typically listen to first interviews again in the car. This was helpful in situating our second interview, which was more focused on meaning making and interpretation than the recounting of events in the first one. After interviews, I initially would re-listen to recordings and type up "listening notes," which would help me in identifying recurring themes. Listening notes were a practice I learned in Sarah

Dryden-Peterson's interviewing course, in which I would re-listen to the recording and then summarize the overall arc of the interview, identify emerging themes, write key quotes, and reflect on methodology. This particular step in the process helped me: (1) actively reflect on the interview experience while it is "fresh" in my memory, (2) identify salient themes prior to coding of transcription, and (3) helped to change my interview questions and timeline practices (considering what questions elicited helpful information and which ones did not). These became very extensive for interviews that were about 2 hours each, so as I conducted more, I began to write profiles of each participant, building a set of spreadsheets with key information across persisters (e.g. "first jobs," "kinds of entry," degree programs, etc.). I also began to visualize my participant data through placards. On these placards, I included key information about each participant. Using these placards helped me think about different groupings and groups within my sample, around indicators such as age, years of experience, and type of organization.

Analysis

My analytical process was iterative, informed by coding processes thematic memo writing, and review of visual data. As informed by narrative analytical approaches, I conducted ongoing thematic (etic) and emergent (emic) rounds of coding to guide my analysis (Hiles, 2007; Silver, 2013) through the use of NVivo, a qualitative coding software program. These initial etic codes focused on previously mentioned categories of occupational *becoming*, *doing*, and *relating*, and followed my interview protocol questions. Therefore, I began this study with initial etic codes for *becoming* such as "entry," "first job," "first youth work job," "learning on the job," "supervision," and "second job," and "mentors." I also coded categories such as "initial motivations,"

“motivations for persistence,” and “rewards,” given my interest in these experiences as part of my analysis. This initial round of coding was fairly general, and mostly mapped on to the structure of the interview guide, but it allowed me to more closely identify nuanced patterns and explanations within these categories and see themes across the life course. I added codes by engaging in “incident” (e.g. event) based coding as well (Charmaz, 2006), to identify important concepts, ideas, themes, and quotes that emerge from the data. This meant finding key ideas and meaning in each interview, which included identifying “in Vivo” codes that consider participants’ verbatim language as emerging themes (Charmaz, 2006). For example, I started noting phrases like “accidental,” “serendipitous,” “survival skills,” and “special kind of family.” Some of these phrases came up in more than one interview.

I identified emic codes as I was coding transcripts categorically. I created tables out of the cross section of some of these etic and emic patterns. For example, when I began to see different groups emerge from “the nature of entry” I began to identify themes across participants in my spreadsheet of participant data. Other emic codes, for example, categories of motivations that youth workers discussed, were coded within transcripts — only later, when I began to write about key themes, did I see the connection between certain emic codes that were all driving motivations as callings. I also considered, what the literature already said about these topics, and considered how these findings were in conversation with them (In Appendix H, I show an example of intermediate coding and coding for Chapter 4).

After identifying emic codes, I revisited and revised my main research questions. My first set of questions were structured by the theoretical framework of *becoming*,

doing, and *relating*. However, my salient findings by codes were regarding patterns of entry and persistence, intrinsic motivations (e.g. social-justice, reflective and corrective, place-based, spiritual), and extrinsic influences (e.g. barriers and supports). These key categories, guided by the framing of precarious work and occupational identity, became the conceptual basis of my analysis. I therefore reframed the sets of secondary research questions. Narrative inquiry analysis can be written as in-depth single cases that are representative of cross-case themes as well as cross-case thematic analysis. Ultimately, my endeavor was to accomplish both of these tasks, showcasing profiles of participants that resonated with my key arguments, while also representing a variety of voices in each chapter.

Research Identity & Relationships

My questions about youth work are motivated by my background as a youth worker, professional development facilitator, and researcher of out-of-school time programs in the city of Philadelphia. I came into graduate school with several questions about the youth work field as informed and inspired by the diversity and richness of practitioners in this city. Based on my experiences, I felt the need to center the strengths of these youth workers, who were typically overlooked in education research and frameworks.

Having this background shaped my positioning in this research. Sharing my youth work background and my commitments to the out-of-school time field were helpful in building connections and relationships for this study. I had a level of insider knowledge about youth work and some insider status in interviewing youth workers with strikingly different backgrounds than my own. At the same time, I was a doctoral student, who had

just spent the past four years reading and writing about the field. I was not *in* youth work anymore, nor was I interviewing in my home state. I had to recognize my outsider status in interviewing youth workers as well, and what it meant that my interviews required 4 hours of their time. During program visits, I tried to take on the role of helper and assistant.

Also, while my participants held various degrees, some from elite universities, I recognized that my Harvard University affiliation could potentially make research participants distrustful of my intentions. Universities in general are notorious for gentrifying cities and their deficit-oriented research on local communities. This concern did not play out in significant ways (to my knowledge); my participants seemed generally excited that someone was invested in interviewing them and curious about what I did as a researcher. A few were cautious, but it did not seem related to my affiliation, but rather because of the nature of my questions about their employment. In this process, I continued to reflect on my interactions with participants as related to youth work and my doctoral student identity.

Early in my interviewing process, I became concerned that participants were actually engaging in forms of “exit interviews” with me. At first, I was alarmed, given my desire to interview persisters, and my pre-screening process with phone calls and surveys. Was this indicative of what was happening in the field? I had to examine and probe at my concerns, recognizing that it was my responsibility to make meaning of their exits and transitions, listening to their decisions rather than changing my sample in pursuit of some pure form of persistence.

In conducting interviews, other parts of my identity were salient. I am a South

Asian-American woman and the daughter of Indian immigrants. These identities became an unexpected point of connection for interviewees, particularly for participants who were immigrants or children of immigrants as well, who comprised almost half my sample. I also believe that my age during the time of the interviews, being in my early thirties, offered shared reference points for the youth workers who were also Millennials. In these interviews, as well as in my analysis, I realized that my identity as a Millennial shaped my approach to questions of work; in my generation, shaped by the Great Recession, I felt that we shared similar skepticism of American capitalism and common references to music, television, and social media. I did not have these same reference points when interviewing youth workers in their forties and fifties, but the timeline activity invited conversation about important cultural and historical moments.

Validity & Limitations

To verify my hunches and preliminary findings during analysis, I revisited key themes and patterns with interviewees during second and (occasional) third interviews. I shared iterations of my findings with a few youth workers, including one who participated the study, through my course on community-based youth programs. Discussing preliminary themes and quotes from participants allowed me to gain ongoing perspective and interpretation from peers, students, and participants. I also shared findings in conference sessions and presentations at organizations like the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST). Peers in my writing groups, some who were youth workers as well, pushed my thinking about my findings, proposing alternative explanations and asked questions that helped me to look for both examples and counterexamples of findings. Additionally, I frequently returned to existing literature on

youth workers and occupational identity during my coding and analysis to see if my hunches were similar or distinct from previous research on youth workers. I began to read more about teaching and care work to better understand the parallels, attending a CareWork MiniConference at the Eastern Sociological Society in Baltimore to share and compare findings with scholars of care work and help-based professions. These forums deepened my conceptual knowledge of how care work is framed and analyzed.

I explored my personal biases through researcher identity journaling throughout this process. Because my personal occupational journey began in youth work and inspired these particular research questions, exploring my identity and relationship to this research was critical. Having a background in youth work, as discussed earlier, was an affordance in building a sample through youth worker colleagues and gaining the trust of my participants. However, acknowledging my history and attachment to youth work along the way has helped me better understand potential preoccupations and blind spots in my analysis. In particular, I had to consider my experiences as a youth worker, professional development facilitator, program evaluator, resource advocate, in which I experienced first-hand how youth work can be easily dismissed even within the contexts of schools and community-based organizations. In recognizing that I may be “defending” youth work, I constantly had to interrogate whether I was romanticizing or valorizing persistence. My committee members, in particular, have encouraged me to be discerning about my positionality, which is often one of solidarity with practitioners. From sampling to analysis, I had to check this particular bias. During interviewing and analysis, I began to notice more clearly the precarity and contradictions in youth workers’ narratives of commitments, as well as the complex nature of entry, persistence, and exits.

Reflections on Methodology

Writing about my methodological process, first at the beginning and then at the end of a qualitative study, consists of two strikingly different experiences. I prepared a set of theoretically and empirically driven research questions; assumptions and hypotheses that framed my interview protocol; a research question-aligned participant selection criteria and contact process; three devices for recording interviews; and a colorful checklist of pre-interview travel reminders. I also felt fairly comfortable reaching out to youth workers, observing youth program spaces, and conducting in-depth interviewing from previous research and work experiences. Prior familiarity with youth work settings helped me in anticipating interruptions in the interview flow, from check-ins from colleagues, youth, and community members, to the cheerful cacophony of both program and café spaces, with potential gusty winds that could knock over our interview supplies when meeting outside. I was ready and willing to jump in to support program activities of the day when I was observing, as long as it was helpful for my participants' work.

However, qualitative work requires constant attentiveness to what we know as well as the unexpected. For example, in reflection of the interviewing process, I did not fully account for the deeply affective nature of life-story interviews. I witnessed youth workers' cathartic tears in sharing what their work meant to them, their experiences of trauma that informed their practice, and work dilemmas and obstacles that led to humiliation and confusion. I was surprised by the extreme caution with which some of my participants agreed to be interviewed; and conversely, the extreme candor of others in recounting their lives and livelihoods.

Typically focused on the youth that they serve and program histories, many persisters expressed that they have not had many opportunities to reflect on their career journeys. Listening to them, and examining and interpreting their meaning making in light of structural inequalities, has informed each aspect of my methodological process. In each chapter, I aim to center the voices of youth workers who offered key case examples of each main argument, demonstrating their individual complexities and situating their experiences in conversation with one another.

Chapter 4: “We Are the Glue”: Community Callings and Boundaryless Conceptions of Youth Work

“There’s always that weird stigma about saying ‘youth work,’ so people will use their titles, ‘I’m the director of ‘blah, blah, blah.’” Ollie, a 28-year-old White youth worker shared at the end of our first interview together at Our Neighborhood Productions. Over the past six years, she has worked in three different community-based organizations. She continued, “I feel like, why the hell do we have a stigma around the word ‘youth work’? It’s some of the most valuable work in the world! I know why, because we undervalue it. So I’m reclaiming the term. I call myself a youth worker.” In describing her experience of becoming a youth worker (Anteby et al., 2016), Ollie shared her intrinsic motivations to stay in youth work and celebrate this label in spite of a society that either valorized or dismissed it. In her new position as the Youth Media Program Director, Ollie believed that she has found her “dream job;” it weds her interests in youth development, community organizing, and media communications. When I asked her about what she would want funders and policymakers to know about youth workers, she responded effusively:

We are the glue that holds communities together. We are the most thankless, under-funded, under-supported, and under-recognized professions that are literally holding communities together. And we are doing it because we love to do it, because we care so deeply about it.

Ollie’s sentiments, her pride in being a youth worker and the passion and commitment she expressed, captures the ways in which “persisters” described their work as a “community calling,” fueled by their love for young people and their belief that this work had greater societal purpose. Ollie’s description of youth workers as the “glue that holds

communities together” also illuminates the key ways in which persisters carried out these community callings through boundaryless role constructions. In this construction, youth workers play various and expansive roles to be responsive to community needs, filling in gaps of care and education in ways that are not visible to the public eye.

In my analysis, I sought to answer the questions: (a) what intrinsically motivates both entry and persistence in youth work? (b) How do these motivations shape occupational identity? In this chapter, I first share the different kinds of entries into youth work that persisters experienced. Youth workers’ descriptions of entry ranged from “accidental” and intentional entry, and from “early starters” to “career pivoters.” I argue that regardless of the type of entry, most youth workers who chose to stay beyond the first few years on the job understood their work as a *community calling*, fueled by love for working with young people and a commitment to a particular community or population of young people. Based on youth workers’ narratives of intrinsic motivations, I identified different motivational dimensions of *community callings*: (a) *social justice* orientations toward the rights and needs of young people, (b) *reflective and corrective* work with young people as drawn from personal experience, (c) *place-based* commitments to particular cities and regions, and, for some, (d) *spiritually driven* beliefs about life purpose. Undoubtedly, there was overlap to features of community callings for these youth workers. With the call to be most responsive to the pressing needs of youth, youth workers took on expansive, multi-faceted roles. I suggest that, by filling in the gaps and needs within a community in their work, youth workers discussed and conceived of their work identities as *boundaryless*, forged by their *community calling* identity. I use the term “boundaryless,” which both builds on and diverges from prior sociological concept

of boundaryless careers (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Interestingly, persisters both understood their work as an all-encompassing responsibility, while also asserting that youth work co-existed with their other occupational identities. I argue that these boundaryless constructions of the youth worker identity is borne out of a culture of immediate responsiveness as well as by necessity given field precarity and job insecurity.

In this chapter, I first describe and interpret the broader patterns of youth workers' motivations for entry to demonstrate the diversity of experiences even within a sample of persisters. I then discuss how, across different the types of entry, these youth workers stayed in the work, motivated by their love of working with youth as captured by different forms of community calling. I then describe different facets of boundarylessness that are fostered by a community calling approach to work. I consider the ways in which entry and community callings play into the formation of career boundarylessness.

Early Starters, Early Deciders, Career Pivoters: Motivations for Entry

The actual nature of entry for “persisters” varied greatly. Persisters described their first jobs in youth work in a number of ways, including as: “accidental” or “my first paycheck;” volunteer work; an exploration of public service through Americorps and international fellowships; “homecomings” to former programs they had participated in as children and teens themselves; and career changes. Most persisters, like Ollie, were “early starters.” These adult youth workers either began in program as youth leaders that they had once participated in as children and youth, or they were exposed to youth work during internships and jobs during or immediately after college. Participants from middle class backgrounds often entered the field through fellowship programs, like Americorps or faith-based initiatives that focused on community service, whereas it was more likely

that youth workers from working class and low-income backgrounds entered through programs they had participated in as youth. “Early starters,” were oftentimes exposed to near peer role models whom they looked up to, or they had positive experiences being mentors to young people, which sparked their interest in this kind of work.

For example, Genevieve, a 35-year-old Black woman, grew up in low-income housing in Adin and had grown up participating in a variety of youth programs across the city. Many of her life mentors were youth workers in these programs. When Genevieve felt that she was uncertain about her next steps after college, she decided to move back home and explore different options for local work. Her former mentors recommended that she apply for the City Summer Youth Employment program as well as a youth leadership position at one of the local City Youth Programs. Because she admired these youth workers and knew she would be trained to excel at her job, she decided to apply for local opportunities in youth work. These early experiences with strong mentorship and training cultivated her attachment and sense of identity as a youth worker.

Within this group of “early starters,” I also identified a subgroup of “early deciders” who felt a strong sense commitment to working with youth and communities from the beginning. These youth workers talked about the realizations that they had in their early twenties, oftentimes in college, about knowing they were motivated by helping others through education, care, and mentorship. Ernesto, who was the youngest participant in my sample, was one such early decider. This 24 year-old Colombian-American youth worker spoke with such conviction and clarity about his choices. Always deemed bright by his teachers in his schools and by his parent at home, Ernesto attended a competitive public high school in Eliot and subsequently a small, selective liberal arts

college nearby. He explained that he felt quite a bit of self-imposed pressure and family obligation to do the most outwardly successful thing, particularly as a first generation college student with immigrant parents from Colombia and a younger brother whom he actively supported and mentored. However, he also felt that this kind of approach to his growth was not actually what he wanted from a career. Inspired by mentors in a summer academy who seemed driven by service learning and education as well as professors who transformed his outlook on a work trajectory, Ernesto knew he wanted to be in a help focused profession. Ernesto began contemplating his career path in college:

One of the reasons that I was really unsure about physics when I was in college, once I had already done that as a major for almost two years, was that I didn't feel like it would really matter to anyone. I mean, yeah, I could do great and in the best case scenario I could publish in a textbook or something or be really great and some people would have to learn some law that I came up with or whatever. At the end of the day, I'd be like, "How is that making anyone happy?" Yeah, it will be useful, and it will be great and I'll be immortalized," but that's not ... if that's the best-case scenario and no happiness comes from that for someone else, then I don't feel good. Getting that realization, that: "Wait, what I actually want is to impact other people's lives." That's what I want to do actively as the goal of my career, is to make other people's lives better. Once I got that, it all kind of fell in ...Okay, "How can I do this? I like working with young people. Boom. Let's go into education. Let's do something like that."

Ernesto was not alone in navigating societal and interpersonal influences while deciding upon his career interests. External pressures were salient for first generation college

students and for participants from immigrant families; early deciders oftentimes pushed against the social currents and expectations in their early motivations for youth work. These pressures also seemed to facilitate clarity in deciding to engage in youth work as well. Across entry types, these youth workers majored in disciplines ranging from the sciences to the arts (e.g. Sam, Ernesto, Carlos, Pablo), but they later realized that community-based change and youth support aspects were driving their choices as opposed to the specific disciplinary focus of their majors.

A smaller group of persisters within my sample are whom I call “career pivoters.” These research participants, Gerard, Omar, Rose, and Thien, were on different paths in policy and law, nursing and pharmaceuticals, and classroom teaching. Each one of these youth workers described being drawn by a mission to support youth in a particular way that was not fulfilled in their current careers. I use the term “pivot” rather than “change” because, based on these individuals’ narratives of their trajectories, their career motivations were always connected to the idea of community engagement and education. However, the desire to center their efforts on mentorship and care of youth was their main decision-factor in changing their career paths. For example, Rose, a 53-year-old White youth worker at Wheatley OurHouse thought she was going to be a teacher for life in Wheatley public schools. However, when the era of No Child Left Behind dramatically shifted the culture of her school from a caring and learning organization to one focused on test-based accountability, Rose rediscovered her sense of purpose in her part-time work at OurHouse. Craving a culture focused on youth-centered enrichment, Rose left her teaching position to become the education director at OurHouse, accepting a pay cut and lack of retirement benefits along with this decision.

Gerard is another example of a career pivoter. Being an unexpected victim of local gang violence compelled his investment in community work and, eventually, his entry into youth work. Gerard felt called back home to Eliot after college graduation from a prestigious HBCU, to “be an advocate.” He joined several community boards and began working for the Census Bureau as an organizer. Building relationships with faith-based organizations and community boards at the time led him into a position where he was a legislative aid for a woman of color representative. This work allowed Gerard to understand the inner workings of politics. He was excited to have a window into the life of an elected official, calling this time “transformative.” “And I hated it!” he exclaimed. “I hated it. I hated it because I felt like 98% of the people that work in the statehouse are the same and there's no real diversity there. How can you expect for things to change when it's the same type of person, and the same types of ideas, and the same types of settings?” The representative Gerard worked with understood his desire to work in the community, and during his time as an aide, Gerard visited different neighborhoods to understand their needs. When he learned about an opportunity to become a youth worker for court and gang-involved youth for the City of Eliot, he leapt at the chance:

I'm 24. I have my degree. I do all this volunteer stuff. I have all these relationships in the community. Why not go back and show some of these kids from this community that look ... I'm a 'possible self.' You can look like me, you can come from same community that I came from, you can be a victim of violence and you can overcome all that shit. You can push yourself to be successful or to at least find a way, or put yourself on the road to success. I'm not

there yet, but at the end of the day these are all the great things that I've been able to accomplish and do. I went and did that for five years.

In describing himself as a “possible self,” Gerard drew on research he had learned in graduate school, in which “African American adolescents are likely to experience social contexts that do not afford construction of plausible futures in which school success leads to occupational success in adulthood.” (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995, p. 1217). In sharing his experiences and being in a visible professional role, Gerard believed he was making the right career choice in spite of pushback from family and friends.

I found that across these groups – early starters, early deciders, and career pivoters – youth workers described a search for meaningful work that had a social justice orientation. Whether entry into youth work was accidental or intentional, these individuals expressed that they were seeking work that they believed was helpful to others in a broader fight for equality. Take for example, Sam, a Taiwanese-American who felt disillusioned by his pre-med classmates’ focus on money versus the community-based health aspects of medicine. While he believed his thirteen years at Farm4Justice started by “accident,” he knew he was searching for work that centered helping others and building community.

Not all early starters believed that they had initially chosen their line of work. Xiomara, a 30 year-old Latinx youth worker who became a youth worker after several years as a participant in a program called Courageous Words, did not feel that she had a choice in the matter. Rather, she believed that she was given these responsibilities because she was good at it. Xiomara remembered when she needed to step away from the

“incestuous” emerging field of youth poetry to attend a community college. She understood this choice as critical to her own development as a young adult:

I was feeding myself [by going back to school], you know? I went into youth work at a very young age and it showed me all these powerful things about myself, but I also didn't choose it. I never chose it. I was saying yes to the opportunities. I was helping to build things, you know? I was enjoying myself, but it wasn't something that I chose. It was something people saw in me, and that there was a role to be filled and that I could do that. I had to feed myself. I had to get a degree. I had to go back to books, to reading. I had to go back to my people.

Ultimately drawn back into creating youth poetry and cultural spaces, Xiomara believed that no matter what, she wanted to do work in which she could “be of use...like the Marge Piercy poem.” Similarly, when Christina, a White youth worker, was working at Whole Foods, she became disenchanted. To evoke the same feeling she had when she worked at summer camp in Appalachia, she began to build a tiny home, to feel that she was doing something “meaningful” again. In all, when youth workers identified program positions that fulfilled that sense of purpose, it felt “serendipitous,” to quote Josué, a thirty year old Haitian-American.

Stories of entry, however, oftentimes exposed the initial struggles that typically motivate early exits from the field (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Nearly half of these youth workers shared stories that were the opposite of the supportive environments that might motivate or foster a positive work identity. Youth workers like Claire and Pablo remembered being thrown into the lives of young people in their first jobs, without structure or guidance. While others were provided with initial structure, training,

expectations, and guiding curricula, most learned to navigate supervision, activity development, and crises on their own. This autonomy fostered what youth workers like Claire and Josué described as “survival skills.” It also, for youth workers like Pablo and Xiomara, offered room for creativity and resourcefulness. However, it also led to confusion and frustration, as well as lessons on what *not* to do on the job. Thin job descriptions coupled with minimal supervision did not represent the skills needed for quality work, nor did they necessarily reflect what motivated people’s entry into the field.

For youth workers who created their own programs, there seemed to be no boundary between personal and professional life, and a sense of never ending work. Practitioners described their responsiveness and adaptation as informed by youth and family needs. In many ways, the hidden job description, the deeply relational work that existed beyond the expected activities, is what motivated youth workers. Most youth workers recounted organizational experiences in which the nonprofits did not have the capacity or infrastructure to support yearlong training or subsidize college costs. Thus, for those who entered nonprofit work at an early age or without a college degree, becoming a youth worker also prolonged the attainment of college and master’s degrees that they believed to be necessary for their growth and advancement in the field.

Youth Work as a Community Calling: Intrinsic Motivations for Persistence

The second argument I make in this chapter is that over time, despite early challenges, youth workers explained to me that they stayed for love and a sense of commitment to the young people and their families. I interpret this intrinsic motivation that fosters persistence a *community calling*. Even as youth workers constantly wrestled

with the challenges and external pressures to exit, they would interject any frustration or critique with a “but” or “well, you know why” mid-explanation to remind me of this fundamental reason for their persistence. For instance, Aminata, a 25-year-old Sierra Leonean youth worker in Glasford, interrupted her own explanation of her parents’ concern about her career path. “I understand they want me to be financially stable and not have to struggle because, the nonprofit world is...it doesn't pay very well. Let's just be honest. Right? It's all about the love that you have for the job and what you're doing [that keeps you going].”

This love and commitment to community betterment, through the uplift and education of young people, is the kind of active and fighting love that Freire (1970) wrote about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Love, with social purpose, fuels persisters to navigate the structural challenges and precarity of their everyday work. In discussing the work of teachers and educators as cultural workers, Freire wrote: “As individuals or as peoples, by fighting for the restoration of [our] humanity [we] will be attempting the restoration of true generosity. And this fight, because of the purpose given it, will actually constitute an act of love” (1970).

Persisters believed that their investment, support, and encouragement would lead to the health, happiness and success of young people. Educational researcher Sonia Nieto (2003) reminded advocates of teacher professionalization, who often dwell on the intellectual nature and technical craft of teaching over the emotional aspects, that long-term commitments are, and must be, driven by love:

In some quarters, it is unfashionable to talk about teaching and love in the same breath. After all, teaching is a profession, like medicine or law or engineering, and

we rarely hear talk about love as a major motivation in these professionals. To be sure, while the word professional brings up images of careful preparation and deep knowledge of a discipline, it also implies a certain distance, as if being a professional meant discarding one's emotions...But teaching is different.

Teaching involves trust and respect as well as close, special relationships between students and teachers. It is, simply put, a vocation based on love. (p. 37)

I found a similar sentiment expressed among persisters. In my sample, these community callings to youth work, which I discuss as the combination of love and commitment, were also driven by a sense of personal meaning associated in helping others, which also served a greater societal and community-based purpose.

I found that the commitment to the work, in spite of challenges, related to a sense of the work as no longer a job, but rather that of a *calling* (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Persisters conveyed community-based callings in different ways. They were (a) social justice-driven, (b) reflective and corrective of personal experience, oftentimes (c) place-based, and for some, and/or a (d) a spiritually driven endeavor. These dimensions of callings are connected to one another. Youth workers explained motivations that connected some if not all of these features (See Figure 4, below). For example, many who felt a social-justice driven calling were also spiritually driven; many who felt they were called to work with specific youth populations were oftentimes personally reflective and corrective and place-based in their work. These overlaps become more apparent in the examples that I provide in the following subsections.



Figure 4. Dimensions of Community Callings

Social-Justice Driven

Many peristers in my sample felt deeply motivated to create equitable and culturally responsive opportunities for young people. These social justice-driven community callings centered the idea of rights and dignity of young people, particularly for youth most marginalized within the school system. For instance, Emilia, a 50-year-old White youth worker who had worked in the field for thirty years, continued to be compelled by and drawn to the feminist mission at Dream Big, which focused on gender equity and equipping girls with life and social skills for adulthood. She saw her work as both “making a difference in the lives of girls” while also an opportunity to “push the needle on gender equity.” Others, like Omar, a 48-year-old Cape Verdean youth worker, developed a cultural and social support system for an overlooked immigrant community. Based on his observations as an English Language Learner (ELL) teacher in an Eliot high school, Omar realized that there was no academic or cultural programming for Cape

Verdean youth. He began an afterschool program for Cape Verdean youth in the corner of a basement classroom in a church building. Driven by a personal mission to support the academic and social wellbeing of this young immigrant community, Omar felt compelled to build a safe space for youth who were becoming increasingly involved in local gang violence.

Claire, a 37-year-old White youth worker who felt very little attachment to her hometown or to a specific place, shared that “justice” was a theme throughout her career trajectory, something that she was willing to engage in with young people “anywhere.” With a master’s degree in social work, Claire had worked in residential care, the Peace Corps, Eliot’s department of youth services, a bilingual youth services center, a school-based student support center, and most recently a community-based organization focused on the arts, Bellas Artes. She oftentimes engaged with the most marginalized youth in these contexts — fostered, adjudicated, undocumented, and homeless. In our conversations, she emphasized that youth work “can happen anywhere,” that it was not just bound to place and time of afterschool programs, but rather, the work of youth support happens across a variety of contexts. In reviewing her timeline at the close of our interview, one in which I asked her to elaborate on the organizations that she repeatedly called “incompetent” in their work with teenagers, Claire began to reflect on what she saw as key themes of her career trajectory:

Every organization has got stuff wrong with it, but I am gonna wind up where they allow me to do the work. I feel like justice is a theme. Justice. I want justice for the kids. So even when I worked with Eliot DYS — and DYS is an organization that puts children in jail. That's what they do. But they need someone

on the inside that can work the system and help them get justice. Justice might mean getting the treatment you were entitled to. It might mean, if your case worker told you “if you do XYZ, they'll ask for you to be released a week early,” and you did XYZ and that case worker calls out that day, okay I might go in present your case for you because it's not fair. It's so unfair to be a kid. I'll never go back to being a child or teenager. Teenagers especially — with almost adult-thinking brains but disrespected like children, treated like children — these decisions are made for them, but also their brains don't work that well either. It's just a shitty place to be, and I'll never go back [to my teenage years]. To be able to validate a kid, and believe in a kid and help them get what they're entitled to, it means a lot to me. I'll do that anywhere. I'll do that anywhere.

Claire's emphasis on both “justice” and the chance to “give them what they're entitled to” were common refrains for persisters. Together, these two phrases represented powerful motivators for youth work persisters, advocating for the rights of youth who may feel powerless and providing resources so that youth can be provided with experiences oftentimes only afforded to wealthier youth and their families.

Reflective and Corrective

Many experienced youth workers talked about their work as an opportunity to both reflect on their past — whether positive, neutral, or traumatic — and offer their support as a way to “correct” the experiences they once had on behalf of other youth. Persisters saw younger versions of themselves in the youth that they worked with, and this deeply motivated them. Dan Lortie (1975) found that student teachers and entry level teachers drew on an “apprenticeship of observation,” the thousands of hours that students

spend observing their teachers, like an audience watching a performance (without a view of the backstage drama). In contrast, I argue that reflective and corrective callings operate as a form of identity work that happens either with the presence or absence of a youth worker to observe. For example, some experienced youth workers saw themselves in the young people they were working with and framed their personalization around the work in relation to their own childhoods (which was oftentimes an absence of caring or supportive adults beyond immediately family). Or, for the persisters who grew up through youth programs — many felt inspired by their youth workers, hoping to emulate their qualities. The corrective aspects of these reflections occurred in the work, when related to either developing access or responding to trauma, focused most particularly on experiences of navigating school or home life.

For example, Nate, a twenty-six year old White youth worker, fondly remembered the mentorship he received from a young, beloved soccer coach in his town. When his hometown coach unexpectedly died, all of his soccer players grieved together. As an adult working at NetPositive, a soccer youth development program located in Eliot, Nate often thought about how to emulate his former coach. In working with Eliot youth, Nate reflected frequently on the differences in experience. He identified the affordances he had by attending a well-funded public high school with a traveling soccer team. Although the backgrounds and life experiences of youth who participate at NetPositive were strikingly different than his own, Nate saw himself in these young talented soccer players. He noted that the key difference, which he aimed to correct, were issues of resource and access inequality, including uniforms, equipment, clean fields, and consistent coaching. When reflecting on one of his current soccer players, who at 17 moved to the U.S., Nate

considered, “If he went to [my high school], had my background, he would be playing at the best club in area. He would’ve been seen by a college coach, he might be going to play division one soccer, might be getting a scholarship.” Nate, seeing himself in these young soccer players, along with vast inequality, aimed to “fill that gap” of resources, knowing that he could not do it all, but that he would “write any type of recommendation that he’ll ask for throughout his life.”

While Nate identified with the young soccer players based on their love and talent for the game, Pablo, a thirty-five year old Puerto Rican youth worker, identified with young artists in Eliot who had the same upbringing as him. Pablo was candid about how he started in youth work; it was part-time paid work after he graduated from college with a degree in fine arts. After eleven-years as a youth worker, Pablo had spent the most recent five years at CityVisions, an art-based entrepreneurship program in Eliot. In reflecting on his own journey, Pablo expressed genuine disbelief at his several years in youth work. He explained that he “never” saw himself spending his days working with teenagers in an art mentorship role as a teenager; but he fell deeply in love with helping mentor young artists who were reflections of a younger version of him. He shared, with a tone of incredulity, “It’s *weird*, because I love it! I love to see them succeed in whatever it is they want to do.”

Pablo’s love and pride for the youth he worked with was connected to his investment in helping provide opportunities to youth who, like him, grew up in the housing projects of Eliot. Witnessing the early deaths of friends and navigating adult responsibilities as a teenager, Pablo’s youth work connected to reflections of his past. There were a few key mentors in his youth, both teachers and youth workers, who helped

him believe in a future for him beyond selling drugs to make ends meet as a teenager. At Eliot YouthActNow, a youth organizing program, youth workers offered young Pablo a space to explore his artistry while also getting paid. As an adult, he wanted young people to have the same, if not better opportunities, than he had to explore their passions fully. He wanted his CityVisions youth to see their art not only as a creative and emotional expression, but also as a positive choice in their lives, and a source of financial opportunity for themselves and their families:

To see them [the youth] succeed, and create paintings...or when Converse, where Converse and another client are fighting to buy their painting. I'm just sitting back like, "yeah I helped do that." That's beautiful to see. That's honestly what keeps me going, makes me want to continue to do this. To see the kids who don't have, or don't think they have, the ability to do what they are capable of doing, and then to see them do it. It's just like, "I told you from the beginning you were all right, that you're able to do this." Other than that, me being there is just, honestly, I was there because I loved it. I was in that line of work for so long because I just love being around the kids and helping kids like myself. That's pretty much all it was.

Pablo saw reflections of himself in young people and was fueled by a sense of love for playing a mentorship role for young artists. The mirroring and corrective work of past traumas fostered his commitment to the work, shaping his approach as a mentor and educator to aspiring artists.

Place-Based

Similar to Pablo, Derrick, a 35-year-old White program director of Winterton's YouthActNow, grew up in the city where he would later work, a densely populated

residential area. A proud 4th generation Irish-American in Winterton, Derrick painted a vivid story of social dynamics of this diverse city that he loves. Predominantly settled by Irish immigrants up until the 1980s, Winterton's demographics have dramatically changed due to the number of university students who moved there, in addition to waves of South American, South Asian, and Haitian immigrant families. Derrick reflected on the many changes to the city he grew up in and the city he sees now:

Well, [Winterton] is home and I also don't know if it's home. There's a rapper called Immortal Technique. He's from Harlem. He talks about gentrification a lot. He says, "From now on things can't be the same as before, because the place I'm from doesn't exist anymore." That's literally how I feel.

Derrick described the ways in which, despite a change in community demographics, he still saw reflections of his childhood story of hardship and struggle in the young people he worked with, and that this particular sense of place and home was deeply connected to his commitment to youth work:

The young people, when I work with them, I'm like, "that's the piece of where I'm from still." That's a huge driving factor [to my persistence]. "You guys are still from... It's different, but you're from where I'm from." That's the one piece that still exists. The physical landscape and the overall demographic of the community, I'm not that anymore, but the kids...that's why I love working with the at-risk kids in particular. I'm like, "You guys are from where I'm from. You're a park kid. You're a little rough and tumble. You have a little edge to you...The Winterton that I grew up in is completely gone, but there's slivers that you still see of it. What a lot of White people don't understand is that you can find those

slivers. It doesn't necessarily mean it looks like you. I use Manuel [as an example of this]. Manuel's a Puerto Rican-Colombian kid. Manuel's me. Manuel's a reflection of me. We're cut from the same cloth.”

There was a reflective and corrective component to Derrick’s calling — the idea that his youth, were “a reflection of me” and that “we’re cut from the same cloth” demonstrated his commitment to work with youth who shared similar struggles to the ones he once had. As a child, Derrick experienced the deaths of friends to opioid addictions and recalled his friends of color leaving the city to join the military. He told me his friends’ reasoning for leaving — they believed their chances of surviving in war were higher than their chances of surviving the opioid epidemic and violence in Winterton.

Derrick grew up without participating in formal youth programs and with a lack of adult mentorship through most of his school years: “I was searching for a hero, and that hero was actually me,” he confessed. His sense of calling was reflective work like Pablo, but it also related to his understanding of growing up in a particular place and community. He shared:

...You relate to trauma. I've read different things. They'll talk about ‘what's your greatest motivator’? They talk about money. They talk about success. Man, it's trauma. Trauma is my greatest motivator. I feel like Angela, the director in Eliot [another YouthActNow site], she's coming from the same place. We can have different forms of trauma, but she's from that community. Angela is not leaving [either]. She's like, ‘This is me. It's part of me.’ You can't teach that.”

As Winterton continues to rapidly change and become less affordable for both working class families and the youth workers who live there, Derrick has considered the

possibility of moving to another city similar to Winterton — that is, one with a large immigrant and working class population. Derrick's interpretation of what and who constitutes a place is nuanced and adaptable.

Whereas at times Derrick felt compelled to leave Winterton and work in other communities or to find a more lucrative job opportunity, his commitment to youth work was deeply rooted in creating a home for young people in Winterton:

[There were times when] I've felt I got to live somewhere else. I've gotta go. I want to go to Belfast. I want to go to San Francisco. I want to live, experience someplace else." One of these things I might have talked about before, you realize, though, "I belong here." There's something about here. People want to find a home. A place where they belong. Everyone wants that. Animals want that. Humans want that. Everyone wants a place where they fit in. I have that. I want to sacrifice that? For what? To go be someplace else where it's like, "Yeah, you can be another number out here," or you can be like, "What are you doing *here*?" It's your destiny.

Derrick's sense of belonging was related to his identity, and it was also deeply tied to place. This dual connection to Winterton, the reflective and corrective and place-based dimensions of his calling, kept him grounded in his work. It gave Derrick a sense of meaning and higher purpose to commit to youth work in Winterton.

Spiritually-Driven

Finally, some youth workers described their intrinsic motivations for persistence as nurtured and sustained by faith and spirituality. With this spirituality, experienced youth workers navigated uncertainties and precarity of youth work with the belief that

they were *meant* to do the work. Nicole, a 37-year-old Black youth worker, believed her faith and prayer allowed her to overcome toxic work environments and times of unemployment to best serve young people and their families. Growing up in Eliot, a neighboring city to Winterton, Nicole began working as a part-time afterschool professional in a program connected to her high school. Fluent in both English and Haitian Creole, Nicole quickly became a staunch advocate and bridge builder between new immigrant families, youth, and their teachers. Over the years, Nicole had worked in a variety of community and school-based afterschool centers and even became a full-time guardian for one of her youth participants. She shared a variety of organizational challenges, including issues with childcare at her programs, financial setbacks, and periods of time without healthcare. However, when I asked Nicole what kept her going, she began to cry:

I knew from the beginning. It was so natural to me, I felt like it was God's gift.

You know, when you love something, you will do it for free. It helped me through difficult times. It was a love of mine...it was my purpose. I didn't know what direction I would go in, but I knew it was going to be in this field.

Like Nicole, Gerard believed that his community calling was guided by faith, a spirituality that he believe supported his personal philosophy of "whatever it takes" [to do the work]:

I don't ever really focus on thinking about what other people are gonna think about me, I just try and remain true to myself, and speak my truth, and act my truth, and for that reason, whenever I think about youth work I don't really ever focus on compensation, or pay, or any of that stuff, because I feel like I'm just

doing what God wants me to do, and I'm just the vessel here that seeks direction. And I get it, and God takes care of my needs.

The spirituality piece is important, and when you really love what you're doing and you really want to make a difference and you have that connection spiritually, I think that nothing's done in vain, and I use all the examples of the young people that had so much promise that I've worked with and that I can remember that are either in jail right now or gone to the sacred land in another place, as inspiration to drive the work that I do every single day, and to make better informed decisions to influence policies around how to work with people and navigate things.

The sense of a higher meaning to Gerard's work was relevant to his passion for staying in the field. These reflections on motivations echoed across interviews. Experienced youth workers flipped traditional scripts of individualistic understandings of why they do the work they do. For many youth workers, doing the work was part of their self-care, as well as community healing. It was an emotional and spiritual endeavor.

Shawn Ginwright (2010) has written, "Effectively working with African American youth requires a commitment to justice and vision for freedom. No graduate course, training program, or book can adequately provide this type of commitment" (155). These words resonated deeply across youth workers' explanations for their sense of persistence in youth work. It was, indeed, a "relentless pursuit of love, peace, and justice" that fueled youth workers (p. 155). Particularly fueled by a social justice-driven sense of purpose, reflective and corrective motivations, place-based commitments, and

spiritually-driven understandings of purpose, youth workers' saw their long-term commitment as a kind of community calling that also nourished and healed their personal wounds as well. In the following section, I analyze the ways in which these community callings also cultivated a boundaryless culture and work ethic that was both fueled by commitment as well as the uncertainty of a youth work career.

The Boundaryless Constructions of Youth Work Identity

The poet Mary Oliver once wrote, “poetry isn’t a profession, it’s a way of life. It’s an empty basket; you put your life into it and make something out of that.” Similar to this explanation of poetry, I argue that the experienced youth workers understood youth work as an inextricable part of their lives, in a way that was all-encompassing in its nature. I suggest that these constructions of youth work identity negate the demarcations associated with modern professions, although perhaps this kind of work is more aligned with how professions were originally defined: developed out of community need and focused on altruism (Abbot, 1998). Therefore, I argue that youth workers’ intrinsic motivations shaped a “boundaryless” occupational identity that bridges research on multifaceted, culturally responsive youth worker role constructions (Baldrige, 2018; Epstein; Noam & Yamashiro, 2014; Fusco, 2012; McLaughlin, 2000) as well as sociological theories of boundary work in occupations and “boundaryless careers” (Abbot, 1988; Arthur, 1994; Oliver, 2013).



Figure 5. Boundaryless Constructions of Community Callings

In Figure 5 above, I visualize the idea of a “boundaryless” career identity through a dotted line around the dimensions of community calling. I further argue that boundarylessness manifested in three key ways in conversations with youth workers: (a) boundaryless engagement, as based on family and community needs, (b) boundaryless time, as youth workers were immediately responsive to young people, whether on or off the clock, and (c) boundaryless coexisting identities, which afforded youth workers the ability to identify with several occupations and bodies of knowledge simultaneously.

Boundaryless Engagement

Several youth workers described the relationships they developed with youths’ families as an essential part of their work. Therefore, youth workers did not conceive of working with youth as a clear boundary; rather, they saw their work as situated within a broader scope of work that supports families and the community. The first time I met Ernesto, who worked for Our Futures in East Adin Housing Development, he was just wrapping up a meeting with one of the youth participants, the participant’s mother, and a

Creole interpreter. This high school student had just been accepted into a national college preparatory program that created cohorts of student support for students to better navigate the hidden curriculum within higher education. Ernesto and the interpreter were sharing the news with the student's mother. For Ernesto, youth work *was* family engagement work:

Having the ability to make those relationships with family members is one of those pieces. So relationships aren't incidental is what I'm trying to say, and to do a lot of those work very well, or at least for me to do it the way that I wanna do it and I know that I work, I need to be able to do it. And if I'm at a place that isn't gonna facilitate that, and I feel like I have to buck the trend or go against what my instructions are to build a relationship, then I feel limited and I feel like I'm short-changing a student.

Ernesto believed that his youth would thrive only with the full support and engagement of families. He did not see this as a passive interaction, rather, he took initiative to seek out families at Our Futures and ensure they were on board for activities and opportunities.

Family engagement was central to many youth workers' practices. For example, Omar wanted to expand on his dream, which was for his youth program to become a full-fledged "one stop shop" for "youth *and families*." He envisioned English Language classes for the parents, immigration services, and additional ways for youth to connect with adults. For Nicole, the line between youth and family engagement was most blurred when she became the legal guardian of one of her youth participants, whose grandparents did not feel capable of caring for her when she became teenager. Inspired by her adopted daughter and her network of friends who would visit the apartment, Nicole began creating

her own 501c3, “Teens Lifting Each Other Up.” She held club meeting in her apartments, and recruited her family members to help her out. She recalled the ways in which she engaged her adopted daughter’s friends in service learning through a family effort:

Here I am, driving my car, pulled up with as many kids as I could possibly have in the car, had my cousin take her car, piled up as many youth as she could probably put in her car. We're driving around, feeding the homeless, but we didn't get out of the car. They [the youth] did. They had to ask questions. They had to have the conversation. It was a powerful, powerful conversation on our way back. A powerful discussion that we had on our way back on how this impacted them. It was amazing.

Youth workers oftentimes talked about the ways in which they developed relational, family-like ties with young people that negated typical understandings of “client” relationships. Both Josué and Sam talked about the importance of food and eating together in their programs, as breaking bread with both youth and their families was a time for informal bonding as well as an opportunity to develop a home-space for young people who did not always have meals available when they left program spaces.

As the interviewer, I experienced this home-like feeling entering many of these programs, oftentimes leaving these visits with an afterschool snack or even fresh produce from Farm4Justice on my drives back home. Xiomara, who grew up through a program called Courageous Words and then developed her own poetry program in Eliot, felt that youth were her family as much as they saw her as their family. She reflected, “I think that youth work is often a way that folks who don't have family build family with other folks that don't. I think as much as I adopt young people into my family, I am adopted into

theirs, you know? And I think that's been really important for me, and as much as it has been for them, I imagine.” This conceptualization as youth work as family indicates that there is reciprocity in this engagement as well.

Boundaryless Time

Persisters oftentimes expressed to me that they could not “punch out” of their jobs, particularly if there was an emergency with one of their participants. Experienced youth workers often felt that if they were the only adult or first responder to a crisis, then that crisis dictated how their time was spent. Youth workers oftentimes distinguished their work from people who worked “nine to five” positions. The first question I asked in interviews oftentimes revealed the boundaryless approach to time on the job. For example, after trying to meet Omar for an interview only to be rescheduled because of an unexpected meeting with a funder, we settled down in a meeting room the following day. I asked Omar to introduce himself and share what a “day in the life” looks like at his job:

Omar: Well, I'm the program director; I've been here for fifteen years. Usually my day starts in the morning, ten o'clock, until eight, nine o'clock at night.

Deepa: That's a long day.

Omar: Meetings, planning, supervision, and the rec center meetings with funders, city members, partners in the community, my staff.

Deepa: Do you work five...[he shakes his head] six...[shake his head again] seven days a week?

Omar: I work Monday through Sunday, Sunday through Monday.

Omar, born in Cape Verde, and a former high school teacher, has been a youth worker supporting Cape Verdean youth in the city of Eliot for over twenty-five years. As

exemplified from the start of my conversation with Omar, it is not clear if Omar ever stops working or is ever off the clock. Rose and Emilia, both in their fifties, also shared that working “nontraditional hours,” including evenings and weekends, was how they understood the demands of the work. This did not mean that they took the mornings off, however, as they were typically holding staff meetings and preparing for participants to arrive. Many youth workers talked about moving away from being a first responder; yet they often moved into coaching youth workers doing similarly boundaryless work. Omar’s approach showed the “persistence” of a round the clock work schedule, whereas Derrick discussed the “evolution” of his first responder role. He continued to engage during off hours, but in a different way:

One kid literally just texted me "I have no food." I'm like, "I'm ordering you a pizza" and then his family ate the pizza. I felt bad because I'm like, “dude that pizza was for you, but whatever at least you all ate.” Right now, those calls go to my staff. They get the late night calls. I'm open to them, if they need me I'm definitely there. I'm more so helping with bail now. It's a \$290 bail...I was like, "alright, I'm the person who can do this. I can pull some money out of my savings and even though it's not a big amount. You can go shovel snow for my grandmother, and we can work it off." Now it's more all of the staff that hit me up, and be like, "Yo, Derrick, this is going on with the youth. What do I do?"

While business start-ups and corporate culture have the same culture of boundaryless work hours, it seemed as if boundaryless work hours were part of how youth workers were both inducted into the work as well as how they continued in it until it became too overwhelming. For interviewees who were parents, this kind of boundaryless culture

oftentimes meant that their children would stay with them during the later evening hours. Unless there was another parent or grandparent at home, these youth workers shared that it was normal to come home at 8, 9, or 10 pm, well after the official close of a program. At times, persisters, contradicted their ideas about self-care or the advice they would want to give to younger youth workers, when explaining their sense of round the clock responsibility to community.

Boundaryless Coexisting Identities

When I asked youth workers who held additional passions or jobs (particularly in the arts) about which work identity was more salient to them, many refused to separate their youth worker identity from their artistry. They also refused to create a hierarchy between which identity was more salient to them. Rather, these youth workers understood artistry and youth work as informing one another. For example, when I asked Carlos, a 30 year-old Puerto-Rican youth worker who had worked in a variety of poetry and theater based programs about whether he first thought of himself as an artist or a youth worker, he responded:

I never would've worked with young people if it weren't for writing. The only form of education that I knew was the classic school education. I didn't know that there were alternative forms of education. I didn't know that there were alternative forms of learning. Therefore, I didn't know that there was other ways of teaching. I always enjoyed the idea of teaching. My mother's a teacher. A lot of members of my family are teachers. But I've never seen myself in a school setting. I substituted for a while but I knew that ... 'cause I knew that working with young people was something I was interested in but it was really when someone asked

me to run a poetry workshop at this youth center, then I realized not only ... So I can do my artistry but I can teach it, and in teaching it, I become a better artist. So, I'm not an artist without also being a youth worker, visa versa. To me they feed each other, very purposefully they feed each other.

Here, Carlos refused to see his youth work and art as in conflict with one another; rather, he saw them as both coexisting and informing each other. Artists like Xiomara and musicians like Ollie felt similarly about holding these identities concurrently. This finding in particular challenges assumptions that youth work is just a way for people to pay the bills in pursuit of their other talents or work interests (e.g. music, painting, sports etc.). However, at the same time Carlos and Xiomara both shared with me that they had to shelve some of their artistry because of boundary less construction of youth work. Making time for other pursuits became increasingly difficult with the boundless hours and responsiveness to youth need.

These boundaryless constructions of occupational identity also meant that youth workers believed that they would always carry their youth worker identities with them, even when they moved away from traditional direct-service work into program management roles, which many experienced youth workers ultimately moved into after a few years. This was particularly striking finding because individuals self-selected into this study; they saw themselves as persisters in youth work. Sam's current work at Farm4Justice and understanding of his role provides an example of this. At the time of the interview, he had been recently promoted from the youth program director to a regional director role and was trying to make sense of why he still identified as a youth worker and saw himself as a persister:

Thinking about the hats, like, those are definitely two that I wear. I think like as a supervisor-mentor, not to youth anymore, but to the folks that I'm supervising, in very different ways. So there's youth workers, there's farmers who I don't have any experience with, who I found a way to be able to mentor and be supportive in a way that's more official for both. Also a cook and a photographer in the organization. That's how I developed the skills, too. So, I'm looked at as a person at Farm4Justice that can put together the meals, the prep plans, how to involve youth. So that's something that I put to use...so it's like, policymaker, community organizer, mentor....It's kind of funny. I don't know if I can say I'm in youth development anymore. In a traditional sense.

As seen in this reflection, Sam began to question whether he was a youth work persister while explaining his roles out loud. Youth workers' renderings of their occupational identities were not traditional. They often defied narrower and more bounded definitions of professions, careers, and work. This multifaceted approach to occupational identity resonated with youth workers' conceptualization of what knowledge was necessary to do the work as well. Practitioners shared how they drew on their degrees in public health, education, social work, and psychology in their positions. Additionally, they described the need for local, community, and place-based expertise, knowledge of young people's lived experiences, sociological theory, therapeutic practices, restorative justice practices, and understandings of human development. Many argued that disciplinary divisions were arbitrary. As Ollie commented "Education can't be divorced from social work and social work can't be divorced from education. That it is one in the same. There's a false

dichotomy between the two, or a false delineation between the two where it really doesn't make sense.”

While youth workers shared boundaryless notions of their work that were related to a philosophical stance on doing the most necessary, responsive work (rather than pro forma programming), I suggest that certain aspects of this construction may be a protective strategy (given the financial limitations within the field) and a form of work culture that was ultimately renegotiated by youth workers to avoid burnout and ensure their longevity. Additionally, given the fluidity afforded in how youth workers identified with the work, this meant that even when youth workers were exiting or considering exits from nonprofits, they still believed they would carry this youth worker identity with them into their next chapter. I discuss how many youth workers renegotiated this boundarylessness in the following chapter in more detail as a coping strategy.

Conclusion: Community Callings Unbound

In this chapter, I explored the intrinsic motivations for entry and persistence. I also examined the ways in which these motivations shaped the occupational identity of persisters. In my sample, many participants, such as Ollie, were “early starters” in youth work. Within this group, “early deciders,” as well as “career pivoters” — a wholly different group — moved into youth work to engage in personally meaningful and community-driven work. While motivations for entry indicate that youth work was a first job for many participants, I suggest that those who stayed in the work eventually conceived of it as a *community calling*, in which their love and commitment to a particular community or population of young people shaped their occupational identity and inspired their persistence. Their narratives revealed interconnected motivational

dimensions of *community callings*, including (a) *social justice* orientations toward the rights and needs of young people, (b) *reflective and corrective* work with young people, as inspired by seeing themselves in young people, (c) *place-based* commitments to particular cities and regions, and, for some, (d) *spiritually driven* beliefs about life purpose. These intrinsic motivations draw on youth workers' identities and beliefs in a higher purpose as sources of strength when engaging with communities, both geographic and population-based.

With these callings to be “the glue” for a community, youth workers engaged in a culture in which they were first responders to the pressing need of youth, taking on multi-faceted roles to be supportive. Therefore, driven by *community callings*, persisters in my sample conceived of their work as *boundaryless* in regards to time, engagement, and expertise. In these constructions of youth work as an all-encompassing responsibility, persisters' beliefs that it also co-existed with their other occupational identities seemed contradictory. I speculate that this kind of refusal around boundaries is partially explained by a philosophical stance, in which persisters push back against categorical and objective knowledge. However, I also suggest that it may be a necessary career construction as well. As Arthur & Rousseau (1996) discuss, boundaryless constructions can be conceived as a way to have agency within jobs with structural constraints. The precarious finances of youth work create a practical “edge” to this work; a boundaryless conception softens this edge. Therefore, job insecurity requires that even experienced youth workers stay flexible and imaginative about their career futures. Conceiving of their occupational attachments as multi-faceted and boundaryless provides fluidity in what future opportunities a youth worker may take. With fewer fixations on the lines traditionally

drawn in professions, persisters believed that they would always hold on to their youth worker identity and its related orientations toward community work.

Chapter 5: “All the Passion, But No Benefits”: Emergent Barriers & Coping Strategies in Youth Worker Persistence

Nicole, tall and elegant, strode toward me from across the room at the end of a family engagement workshop I had co-facilitated for youth workers in Adin and Eliot. Eagerly handing me her business card, she told me, “I want to be part of your research. I need to keep growing, and this session reminded me that I have not been able to do that.” Her eyes widened as she told me that the middle school where she ran a youth program was “trying to put a lid” on her creativity, a sentiment that she repeated again during our interviews. “Also, I have all the passion [to be in this field], but no benefits. There's no retirement plan in afterschool.” I quickly jotted down our conversation; there was an urgency and clarity to her words that I did not want to forget. Later that day, Mary, who had coordinated the OST workshop series, separately suggested that I reach out to Nicole. Mary was coaching youth workers running out-of-school time programs in Adin and Eliot public schools. She was concerned that school and program leaders were excluding Nicole from community partnership meetings at West Eliot Middle School.

Even before our first interview, I had learned that Nicole, a 37 year old Black youth worker, was stifled and underappreciated at her current job, was not receiving adequate salary or benefits, and was shut out from meetings with school leadership. Almost in the same breath, she expressed determination to find a way to stay in youth work. In our interviews, Nicole expressed her work as a calling, “a gift from God,” and something that she loved so much she “would do it for free.” In this chapter, I seek to answer: (a) What are the social conditions and barriers that continually challenge persistence? (b) What strategies do youth workers employ to cope with or mitigate these barriers? Nicole’s experiences, which she expounded on through life story interviewing,

revealed the intersecting challenges of long-term commitments to youth work: at the societal, organizational, occupational, and interpersonal level. As a Black woman, Nicole already experienced everyday racism and sexism beyond her work. Her narrative of navigating youth work as a career intersects with, adds, and reveals layers of marginalization that made her continuity in the field even more precarious. Nicole has employed a host of personal strategies to cope with these obstacles that can lead to career burnout and exits, as I elucidate below.

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which external influences at the societal, organizational, occupational, and interpersonal level pose ongoing pressures for youth workers' sense of occupational identity. These barriers emerged in experienced youth workers' narrations of their career trajectories. As told by many youth workers in this sample, these social and structural barriers jeopardized their persistence. Experienced youth workers shared that they constantly felt "pushed out" by current economic forces, "shut out" by organizational leadership and management, "burned out" by the boundaryless culture of youth work, and experienced pressures to "grow out" out of the work by familial and personal expectations. I highlight youth workers' nuanced understandings of these impediments to persistence. After elaborating on each kind of situational barrier and the effects of these circumstances on youth workers, I discuss the particular ways in which experienced youth workers responded to these challenges through coping strategies. These strategies are ones that youth workers engaged in on their own to be able to keep working with young people. I argue that these strategies reveal how community callings supersede organizational commitments, in a way that job-hopping and organizational exits become a form of career persistence for many youth

workers. Furthermore, I consider how individual strategies of persistence were not necessarily positive, but rather, a reality of what youth workers were doing to stay involved. I conclude by considering the price and toll of self-driven strategies on persisters and the unintentional mark that individual strategies create, masking the underlying societal and organizational issues that must be addressed in order to combat these various barriers to persistence.

Emergent Barriers to Persistence & Coping Strategies

James Baldwin once wrote, “The price one pays for pursuing any profession, or calling, is an immediate knowledge of its ugly side.” Although experienced practitioners shared personal and community driven motivations, these “persisters” also opened up about their struggle to continue in this line of work in the face of an array of challenges. For many practitioners, their uncertainty about continued commitments within the nonprofit sector was an ever-present topic in our interviews. These youth workers shared several experiences and situations that tested their career continuity, which build, expand, and complicate known barriers to persistence (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Despite negative situations and obstacles at the societal, organizational, occupational, and interpersonal level, youth workers found ways to commit to meaningful work. In response to social conditions of gentrification and financial push out (e.g., student debt), youth workers held multiple jobs. In response to feeling shut out by their organizations, they moved to new positions (i.e “job hopping”). To navigate the “boundaryless” culture of the occupation, youth workers employed self-care routines and ultimately renegotiated boundaries between professional and personal life. To address familial and personal pressures to

grow out of youth work, some youth workers advanced to supervisory positions or anticipated this strategy as a way to stay in the field.

As seen in Figure 6, below, coping strategies were employed as a response to various barriers in the field. It should be noted that this diagram presents a simplified version of barriers and strategy responses compared to the complexity described in individual narratives. There were several compounding and overlapping conditions and barriers for each youth worker (who also experienced youth work at intersection of race, class, and gender), and therefore, each person employed multiple coping strategies. In the follow sections, I describe each thematic barrier through the voices and experiences of my interview participants and discuss the corresponding coping strategy they engaged in to mitigate the effects of these obstacles.

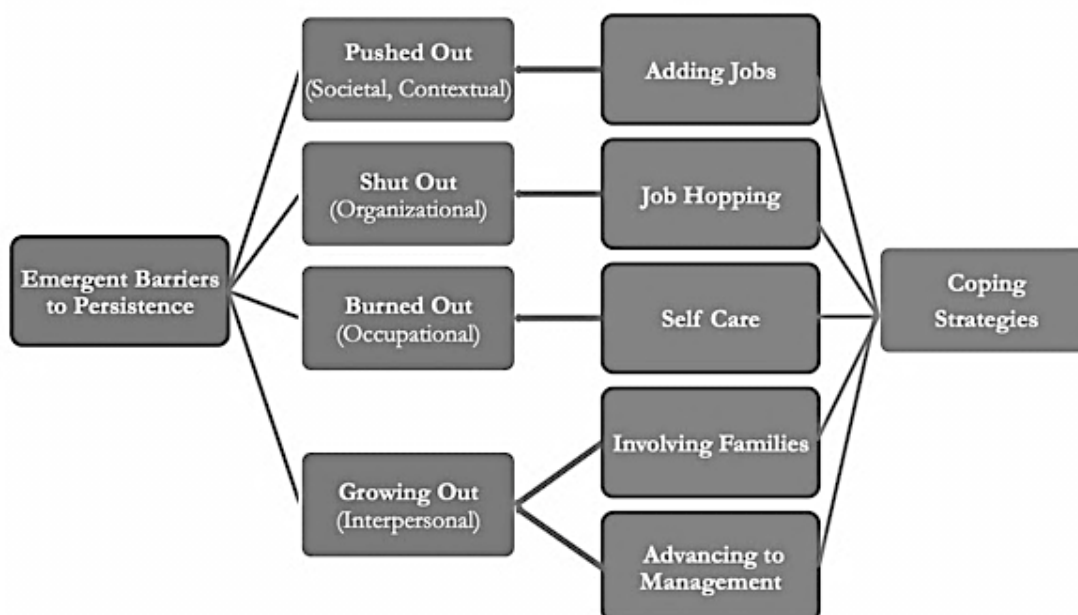


Figure 6. Experienced Youth Workers' Emergent Barriers to Persisting & Coping Strategies

Societal and Contextual Barriers: Pushed Out

Low pay has been a consistently identified issue that contributes to early departures from youth work; however, youth workers acknowledged their persistence in spite of this issue. For persisters in my sample, the increased cost of living and burdensome student debt were the most pressing factors in navigating their commitments. Indeed, youth workers from working-class backgrounds, particularly those who were parents, had student debt, or desired to go back to college to finish degrees, discussed the ways in which neighborhood gentrification and housing affordability made their push out from the field almost inevitable. Because these youth workers expressed their rootedness in place-based community callings, living fairly close to their youth and the surrounding community felt critical to excelling in their jobs. Financially, having to move also had a cascade effect on how responsive they could be to youth and colleagues, the cost of transportation, and community relationship building that was central to the work. However, even youth workers in programs connected to local housing associations were caught in the middle, neither able to afford the rising rental costs in cities nor qualifying for Section 8 housing.

For Nicole, staying in youth work in Eliot or Adin has been most challenging while raising her young daughter as a single mother. She recalled the pressure of making ends meet while also paying off her student loans:

Eliot is expensive! I was living paycheck to paycheck. I was not able to save.

After I calculated all my bills and everything and budgeted, I probably had, I don't even know, less than \$50 left to my name. We didn't even do groceries yet by that time.

While in between jobs, Nicole applied for government assistance to stay afloat. However, even when she worked full time in community programs, she struggled to cover basic

costs. Similar to other participants, she applied for the federal loan forgiveness program for people who had worked in the public and nonprofit sector for ten years. However, there was a stipulation regarding making regular monthly loan payments for a series of consecutive months to qualify. Just as she was nearing the consecutive pay mark, her car transmission broke down. Nicole had to make a choice: fix or replace her car (while going into forbearance or delinquency with her loans), or lose her way of getting to work. “It’s a cycle,” she told me.

This cycle particularly affected youth workers without financial safety nets. Derrick, a 35-year-old White youth worker at Eliot YouthActNow, described the bind of rising costs of living coupled with static salaries he had felt in recent years. Growing up poor, Derrick did not rely on parent or partner earnings, and the changing landscape of Winterton also meant pressures on how he spent his money:

With YouthActNow it's hard because a year from now my lease is going to be up and my rent is going to go up and my salary is not...I'm finding that I'm at a place where I'm like, man, my budget is really tight. You want me to stay in Winterton and keep doing this work, but the city is becoming so expensive. You get money from the city, except none of it is... it's not even that I want it in my pocket.

Derrick also worried about not having the opportunity to finish his bachelor’s degree while working at YouthActNow, which could also affect future job prospects. All of this mattered because Derrick wanted to continue working in youth programming, but living in the community where he was working was becoming nearly impossible.

Conversely, youth workers who came from middle class and upper middle class backgrounds or did not have children or student loan debt recognized their privileges.

They knew that they could live closer to their workplaces with less concern about being pushed out of the work. For example, Nate, a White twenty-six year-old working at a positive youth development soccer program, NetPositive, recognized that his passion was afforded by a set of privileges that should be granted to everyone in the profession:

It's so important – I keep saying this – to have compensation that you can keep doing this. I'm privileged enough that I don't have student loans. I live close enough that I don't have a car. I'm fine having as many roommates as I do in order to be able to do the work that I do, but there's a lot of people that might want to be doing what I'm doing but don't have the means. They're like, "I have to get a job that pays more," or "I have to live at home because I have student loans and I need to pay those to the bank and not to rent." My privilege makes it so that I can be living in [the neighborhood in Eliot where I work], living there means that I can stay here as late as I want, I can be anywhere whenever. So having the amount of privilege that I have makes it possible for me to be as successful and as much of a resource as I am for my students.

Nate highlighted the confluence of social factors — proximity to workplace, life stage, debt-free status — that afforded him some ease in doing demanding work.

In the past few years, researchers and journalists have uncovered the impact of rising city costs and unlivable wages. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, seven and a half million Americans are considered “working poor.” These are working adults who make an income below the poverty line. In *New York Magazine*, DW Gibson (2017) featured several working families who were homeless in New York City, pushed out by rising rental prices, waitlists for Section 8 housing, and minimum wage jobs: “They cut

hair, serve food, care for the elderly, and run after-school programs. They're not an anomaly: 71 percent of the shelter population is made up of families, a third of whom have a head of household who is working." Featured in this article was a nonprofit director who described these issues:

"The new working poor are homeless," says Christine Quinn, the former City Council Speaker who now serves as chief executive for Win, a shelter provider for women and families. "A lot of them work for the city or not-for-profits. I can't tell you I don't have a Win employee living in a shelter somewhere."

This sound bite expresses the urgency of housing affordability, while also revealing the complacency of the nonprofit sector in not providing a livable wage to their employees.

Coping Strategy: Adding on More Jobs

On the verge of being pushed out by gentrification and burdensome student debt, many interview participants, particularly those who were single or in single-income households, held one or two additional jobs. For most respondents in my sample, their youth work positions were full time salaried positions (40 – 50 hours a week). Some youth workers described additional work as essential to cover basic costs of living such as rent, utility bills, and groceries. Additional work included waitressing, retail and customer service, driving for shared car services like Uber and Lyft, running small businesses, custodial work, graduate teaching assistantships, and professional workshop facilitation. Some of the older youth workers who were in program management or executive positions did not have to employ this strategy, but they were either in dual-income households, receiving parental financial support, and/or covered by benefits from their organizations.

In the age of the “sharing” and “gig” economy, the ability to quickly secure another job for additional money has been glamorized through advertisements as a way to treat yourself and your family to middle class niceties. However, this is not typically how youth workers shared the experience of additional jobs. For instance, even when Nicole was working full-time, 10am to 8pm, in a community youth program during the week while her mother helped with childcare for her daughter, it was not enough to cover their expenses in Eliot. In response to rising prices, Nicole jumped into action:

I had to get side hustles and be creative about it to try to make up the differences that I wasn't making. When Uber first came out, I was like, "Well, I guess I'll drive at night." Friday night, Saturday night, and Sunday was my rest day. But that was trying to make up for the extra money that I don't have. [For] supporting my child.

In fact, many noted that these additional jobs paid better hourly rates than their youth program positions. For example, Derrick recalled when he first started working at Winterton YouthActNow over a decade ago. Accepting the part-time job as a youth leader meant taking a pay cut from his job as a unionized custodian at an engineering college. Although he expressed disliking his custodial position, it offered him a stable income and benefits that his youth work position did not. Therefore, Derrick decided to continue as a part-time custodian and also worked as a bar bouncer over the weekends to cover his rent and basic expenses. Derrick estimated that he spends between 40-45% of his salary on rent in Winterton.

Sometimes, it seemed that holding several jobs at the same time was so normalized among my interviewees, that they only mentioned it to me in passing, to

explain their weekend plans or in conversations about housing affordability in the region. Over time, I learned to ask participants explicitly about other jobs, even when youth workers described their positions as full-time. For example, Genevieve, a thirty-six year old Black youth worker, who grew up in Adin's low-income housing and worked for a program connected to the housing authority, mentioned her second job in answering how she afforded living in Adin, where rent prices were rising rapidly. As we settled into her office for a second interview, she explained to me her residential supervisor role for senior citizens with medical needs and disabilities. "You can't have just one job in the human services, you have to have multiple, it just doesn't pay all the bills, it doesn't," she asserted. In her residential role, she was responsible for cooking dinner, giving medications, preparing and ensuring that residents went to bed, documenting their health condition, and waking them up in the morning to help them start their day. She was on duty three and a half days per week. In return, she lived in the apartment building rent-free. Genevieve brimmed with gratitude for having learned about this opportunity and job opening through a friend; however, she recognized that this set up offered little to no free time to restore and recharge.

While for many, taking on multiple jobs was a financial necessity, some youth workers, like Aminata, expressed taking on multiple jobs to also explore different passions and interests. Aminata, a 25-year-old Sierra Leonean youth worker at Farm4Justice, felt that she had a second job at a senior living center to both pay her student loans and to understand a related profession to youth work. This speaks to the boundaryless construction and identification with similar professions. However, Aminata also ran a small hair-wrap business, which she felt spoke to her belief in empowering

girls of color to appreciate their beauty. Pablo, a 36-year-old Puerto Rican youth worker who worked at CityVisions, shared that he appreciated having painting and mural commissions in addition to his mentorship work at this arts-based organization.

Finally, youth workers took on jobs that allowed them to make up the difference while also sharing resources with their youth. The method of “robin-hood” practices, “stealing from the rich to give to the poor,” is a term known among the philanthropic foundations, nonprofit organizations, and the public sector (e.g. law, medicine) as a way to sustain organizations and offer more equitable services to diverse income communities. That is, some nonprofits will run fee-for-service and sliding scale programs in order to generate revenue for programming for youth from low-income backgrounds. What I found interesting was that this phenomena and tactic was occurring at the individual level to persist in the work. While youth workers did not explicitly name this strategy a “robin hood” one, I interpreted their explanations for their additional work as a strategy to continue doing the youth work with communities in need. Some practitioners, like Carlos and Claire, held trainings, workshops and programs with youth at local private academies. These jobs with wealthier youth were often shorter gigs (a week or weekend workshop) that supplemented their ability to do work with populations from low or middle-income neighborhoods, in which these youth workers felt more deeply invested. Ollie described that at Our Neighborhood Productions in Eliot where she had just begun working, ran a sliding scale fee-for-service programming. She saw her work with middle class youth as subsidizing her no-cost partnership work with community centers in Winterton. Other youth workers, like Xiomara, found ways to use resources like space at the universities they were attending or affiliated with, to share with their young people at

Lift Our Voices. Use of university resources greatly cut down expenses on costly rent and art supplies.

Organizational Barriers: Shut Out

Among my sample of “persisters,” almost half of these youth workers felt underappreciated and sidelined at their jobs. This undervaluing was a more salient discussion among youth workers who ran programs in schools, housing associations, and neighborhood organizations, where youth workers felt like there was “territorialism” around resources and engaging with the community (Anthony & Morra, 2016), a disconnect from managers and the practice of youth work, and racist, deficit views of the communities (Baldrige, Medina, Reeves, & Beck, 2017; Fusco, Matloff, & Nieves, 2013). However, it should be noted that some youth workers felt this undervaluation, or, a sense of complacency about their professional growth, within standalone youth organizations as well. Across organizational settings, undervaluing manifested when it came to creating opportunities for youth, having agency in decision-making, philosophical tensions about how to engage young people, as well as negotiations of finances and benefits.

Nicole’s most recent experience with being undervalued occurred in her position as the youth program director at West Eliot Middle School. She joined the program with enthusiasm and years of youth work experience engaging youth and families of color in Eliot. With this excitement, Nicole tried to share new ideas to bolster student participation in afterschool activities. She kept offering new ideas and became frustrated with not being heard. She explained:

We [were] the only community center in West Eliot; there's not one community center... this is the only one. We could be doing so much more. How are we utilizing our capacity, how are we ... you know what I'm saying. How do we make it even better? How do we service the youth that's here?

However, there were several service organizations connected to the school that created a culture of competition, a fallacy of scarce resources (around working with school leadership and recruiting youth and afterschool staff for programs). The administrative coordinator and her supervisor began to shut her out of partnership meetings, not telling her when and where they occurred. When I asked why these dynamics came to a forefront, she framed it as “territorial:”

It was pettiness, complete pettiness. And it came to a point where I was working in such a toxic environment that I was like, "This is not who I am, this is not a place that I need to be in." But at the same time I love my students, I love my families, and I'm doing what I love doing. However, the administrative part of it, I despised it. And I think I described this to you, I know my capabilities, I know what I've done in the past, and it was as if they tried to put a lid on me to stop me from doing that.

Nicole described being shut out from meetings as being “punished for being vocal and an advocate” at her job at the school.

Xiomara, a 30-year-old Latinx youth worker, also expressed her experiences of organizational management that engaged in punitive practices with employees. She recalled her work at Bellas Artes, a neighborhood association in which youth programming was “just one small arm of a larger political machine.” Initially, Bellas

Artes offered her health care and paid sick leave and vacation days — these benefits offered security she had never experienced before as a youth worker. However, over time, Xiomara felt that the benefits of the job were in name only, and that the management of the organization refused to give the paid leave through vacation days that she requested. She believed that elitism and nepotism misdirected the organization, which manifested itself in their unawareness of shifting racial demographics in their community. This undervaluation felt most striking to Xiomara in the inequality in pay between executives, who were making six figure salaries, and youth workers, who were making between twenty to thirty thousand dollars a year.

Xiomara realized youth workers were typically shut out from broader organizational decision-making, which was particularly upsetting to her given the grassroots origin story of the program. She and her colleagues, mostly overlooked as youth workers, were able to do their work with a good amount of agency. However, “if you said anything against the machine or against the head of the beast, you were gone,” she said. She believed that Bellas Artes did not actually care for youth workers; rather, they were driven by their public image. According to Xiomara, Bellas Artes began commending her work when her youth began receiving public awards, which attracted positive publicity. This publicity was not central to how Xiomara framed her work. “Youth development work isn't always very flashy. *Good* youth development work,” she emphasized, was more about the day-to-day relationship building and activity engagement.

Nicole and Xiomara’s experiences of undervaluation and management-youth worker disconnect were not uncommon among interviewees. Genevieve, who worked

with a program with the Adin Housing Authority, burst into tears when sharing the fallout from a recent meeting with housing authority management. She tried to advocate for paid overtime for herself and her colleagues, so that she and her staff could attend more professional trainings:

Being a young person who grew up in the housing authority [in a nearby community], having participated in [this youth program] as a youth, I have a different agenda here. I'm *really* here to support these young people and their families. And make sure that the generational cycle of just new heads of households [within Adin low income housing] for these young people don't exist. If it's possible. But I really want to hone in on the fact that we need to do more around this department...trust building, community building, for a stronger relationship.

When she followed up with an email to explain her ideas and express feeling intimidated at the meeting, she received an email back insinuating that she was welcome to leave her position. "The crappy lesson here is to not speak up, right?" Genevieve said, wiping her eyes with a tissue. She felt a genuine disconnect between the housing authority and her goals for Adin youth. Noting the difference between youth workers and managers, she told me: "They're [management] not the touchy, feely kind of people like we are. They don't see people in the whole person. These families are another tax credit [for housing management], it's just that."

Although Nicole, Xiomara, and Genevieve all shared experiences of organizations where youth services and youth development staff were marginalized, issues of disconnected supervision coupled with racist and deficit oriented practices toward people

of color were also rampant in standalone youth programs. Like Xiomara's concerns about youth work as a public relations gimmick, Pablo realized he and his youth were being tokenized without being taken seriously at his first youth job at Eliot SafeZone. Even when he started his job, he was "thrown into a room" with a group of teenagers and had to figure out what activities to do with them. As he developed a trusting relationship with a racially diverse group of youth who were typically in conflict with one another, he began to feel a sense of competence on the job. However, Pablo felt that his experience was ignored in the decision-making by the program management. For him, the last straw was drawn when management chose only White youth to represent their program for a fully funded youth leadership trip, after asking for him to recommend three youth and alternates for the trip. These youth were ultimately kicked out of the leadership training for underage drinking. Pablo felt that the program managers' decision to override his recommendations demonstrated how they undervalued his knowledge of the youth he was working with:

I gave them the people who I thought would benefit from the trip and would make us look good at the same time. There was a Dominican girl, there was a Haitian girl, and there was a White girl. I gave them my list, and I explained why I chose those three. They were all A students, they were well behaved, they were well spoken, and they were motivated to do different things. They would be perfect, and they would make us [SafeZone] look really good. None of the kids I chose were chosen. I said, "Why would you choose them? They weren't listening to the kids because of the color of their skin, they weren't accepting them to do different things than they had [done before]. But if they needed a poster child they go grab

those kids, and take pictures with them, and we're on the news, and we're in newspapers.

Pablo felt that the organization undermined genuine care for youth of color in the program through decisions such as this field trip, while also undermining his sense of dignity on the job as well.

Even when youth workers stayed at the same organization for several years, they questioned how and why they were being valued, especially when it was at the personal cost of them finishing undergraduate degrees or carrying significant student loan debt. For Derrick, who has not been able to finish his bachelor's degree, he wondered about whether his community expertise was actually valued in the same way as someone with formal degrees would be at YouthActNow:

There's a reason why Lisa was the director and [the ED] let her go and he kept me. She had a master's ... she had two master's degrees, and that [decision at the time] made me feel very valued. But then it's like, oh...you're also valuing the fact that I'm a cheaper deal. I'm good...I'm cheap money.

Derrick worried about the reasons why YouthActNow kept him on, whether he was the “cheaper deal” for the organization. Ultimately, these concerns diminished his feeling of professional worth as a youth worker.

Coping Strategy: Job-Hopping

When youth workers felt that external managers were not invested in youth work, perpetuated the harm from which they intended to protect youth, and shut them out from decision-making, it motivated them to seek other employment opportunities. This was often an emotionally fraught decision, because it meant leaving behind the youth and

families that they served in the program. However, because youth workers were frequently on a texting/phone basis with youth, they stayed connected to youth and their parents regardless of the organizational affiliation (especially if they continued working in the same city). Through job-hopping, some youth workers enacted their boundaryless sense of career identity, one that was not tied to an organizational sense of identity and professional worth (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Organizational exits have been deemed a youth services sector issue, costly for organizations to hire replacements and detrimental to youth who become attached and come to expect to see the same caring adult after school. Based on these accounts of organizational shutouts, experienced practitioners framed moving from job to job a necessary coping mechanism to stay in the career. Additionally, youth workers described these exits in a way that allowed them to protect their sense of dignity.

Experienced youth workers shared that most direct-service positions in nonprofits were designed for exits; therefore, practitioners who exited organizations felt more loyalty to the communities they grew up in or populations they worked on behalf of rather than the institutions where they were employed. When Nicole began interviewing for a job, she realized that she needed to be interviewing these institutions as well. As she recounted an interview with the City of Eliot, she framed her work as a career, acknowledging how many organizations do not create job conditions that offer security or permanency:

You can't expect a youth worker to stay in this position for years, because you're not offering them the longevity, the necessities in order for them to thrive in this field, right? But, you're expecting them to do all of this [work]. So, yes you invest

in them professionally, but you also have to invest in them *personally*. "What are your goals? What would you want to do? What mark do you want to leave in this world? How can I help you support that?" And that's what it's about. It's investing in people. Because they're not going stay here forever. Because you're not giving them the opportunity, nor the funding, nor the health insurance. You're not giving them any of that. They [Eliot interviewers] missed out; it went over their heads.

Girl, it went over their heads.

Claire, a 37 year old White youth worker recounted her many organizational moves over the years, oftentimes triggered by extreme concern and disappointment at the “incompetence” [her words] and unethical behavior of organizational supervisors and colleagues. After she mapped out her job changes on the paper timeline, she looked at me with a wry smile: “And this is how you persist in a [youth work] career, you change jobs every three years.”

Similarly, Pablo left SafeZone after management disregarded his advice about which youth to send for the leadership program. Several of his youth participants asked him what had happened and why they were not chosen for the trip. Pablo told the managers:

“You're okay to use them [the youth] for publicity, using the minorities [youth] of this area, but when it comes to doing things that would benefit them you won't use them. That doesn't make sense to me.” I was like, “that's not okay with me,” so I had to step down. I stepped down, and I was out of work for a little bit and ended up breaking my leg, and I was out of work for a lot longer.

Pablo's exit from SafeZone, and the series of life events that followed, show that for many respondents, organizational exits were a way to cope within the career rather than a way to exit youth work. Indirectly, Pablo also shared a mentality that "persisters" seemed to hold on to — when he slipped on ice shortly after he quit, he was able to pay back his loans through disability coverage. He shared with me, "I'll deal with the pain;" that is, coping mechanisms, like the happenstance injury that helped him pay off his loans, were individual, happenstance fixes to the systemic issues at play.

Claire and Pablo left their respective organizations on moral and ethical grounds. Scholars Doris Santoro and Lisa Morehouse (2011) found that teachers often left their profession based on moral and ethical grounds: "akin to conscientious objectors who refuse to fight wars they deem unjust, principled leavers resign from teaching on grounds that they are being asked to engage in practices that they believe are antithetical to good teaching and harmful to students." (p. 2671). Rather than leave the profession altogether, I found that most of my interviewees coped with toxic and unethical organizations by leaving these nonprofits, but continuing in youth work in some other form in other organizations and institutions.

Ollie, a 28-year-old White youth worker, came to realize that there was no sanctity in staying in a position at Adin's City Youth Programs where she felt repeatedly punished for being creative with activities. A few months into Ollie working at this organization, she found out her immediate supervisor was "checked out" and leaving. Her supervisors' advice was to "get out while you still can." In spite of these warnings, Ollie felt determined to build trust with the youth and staff that she was supervising and to be a good listener to the community needs. She reflected:

I've always had the tendency to wanna work myself so, so, so, so, so hard and prove myself or to be like, 'I'm not gonna give up.' But at a certain point it's not giving up. It's preserving your own sense of who you are. Your option is to continue to feel frustrated and stuck and pulled in seventy different directions and never be able to really feel like you're accomplishing anything. Or even when you accomplish something that you're super proud of, like our hip hop showcase, and then it gets mic cut in the middle of it because of a swear word. And I'm like, "these kids are 16 years old. Are you kidding me?" And it was my fault; because I didn't adequately impress upon them how important it was that they didn't cuss.

Similar to Pablo, when Ollie felt she was hitting the same barriers repeatedly, and not being given the agency she desired to facilitate youth events, she began to look for other opportunities. "At a certain point you have to say "f--k it." That was the thing I learned. You don't have to be a martyr." Ollie realized that if she was unhappy in Adin City Youth Programs, it was unlikely she was being effective as a youth worker there as well. Her decision to leave this organization was emancipating, and the icing on the cake was that her youth were happy for her when she shared the news about her job at Our Neighborhood Productions. Persistence, therefore, as job-hopping, was coping as well as resistance to the culture of guilt and martyrdom that makes it very unpleasant to leave an organization.

Occupational Barriers: Burned Out

As discussed in the previous, youth workers frequently enter the field at a young age, with "boundless" energy and "boundaryless" notions of their responsibilities for youth. However, this culture, combined with a lack of onsite resources to engage young people,

and compounded by aforementioned issues of financial constraints and organizational politics, oftentimes led youth workers to feel exhausted in their roles. As Xiomara reflected on the past five years, building a youth spoken word poetry organization, Lift Our Voices Eliot (LOVE), from visions around a kitchen table to a 501c3, she shared both the love and exhaustion she experienced. Looking at the timeline she created, she reflected:

Even though I spend most of my time with young folks' work, or adults working with young folks, I was just unhappy here. Like, on that graph, on that timeline, I could tell you all about my work here. That's how I frame my time here, and that's how I've made all of the friends that I have here [in Winterton and Eliot]. That's how I make friends, you know? I make friends with people through working with them. I make friends with people who have a shared vision.

...Professionally, I was happy. Personally, I wasn't. And that's hard. And I also think that I've been doing, specifically, youth spoken word work for what? 12, 11 years? I think that Lift Our Voices was an exercise for me in, can we build a youth spoken word arts organization that cares for its staff and its young people in the ways that I was not cared for as a young person? And I think now I'm interested in studying, and learning more for myself about how we can expand upon the work that has already been done.

Xiomara's reflections reveal the ways in which the culture of boundaryless work hours and engagement was ultimately not sustainable for her personal life. Similarly, Christina, a 29-year-old White youth worker at Catherine OurHouse, shared with me that she was

uncertain about how much longer she could stay in youth work. She questioned her ability to give her all in a direct-service position for much longer, telling me:

I think that there are some days when it feels like the relationship with the kids is what keeps you grounded and what keeps you going and keeps you excited coming back every day. There's a part of me that feels like if I didn't have that it might be hard to seem motivated.

On the flip side of that it's like I feel like this is a young kid's game, working with young people. I wonder sometimes if I'm getting jaded or just don't have the energy. I know I'm not so old. I'm only 29, but when I was a camp counselor, and I was 20 years old, [I remember] the amount of energy I was able to bring.

We also have two AmeriCorps members and they both just graduated college, and to see that kind of energy that they are able to bring...I guess, at no point do I want to do a disservice to the kids. I want to be able to bring full energy and full attention, and I just think that you definitely see people that stay in youth work too long, just because it's what they've known. I feel like the same thing with teachers, like “you should have retired 20 years ago, why are you still doing this?”

It was sometimes difficult to tease out emotional burnout as distinct from the various forms of stress and distress that youth workers related to workplace conditions.

Christina's program had been moved due to construction and renovations at Catharine Ourhouse, and she often felt that there wasn't enough time to do full justice to curriculum development, planning, and quality programming while negotiating the change of space. Typically, youth workers' stress was explained as issues with other adults, a lack of on-site resources, or generally feeling demoralized by managements' stance. Experienced

youth workers rarely complained about the demands of working with youth, although, like Christina, some of them felt drained by cultivation of multiple, caring relationships. Sam, who was recently promoted to a supervisory and policy role at Farm4Justice, was on the verge of the emotional burnout prior to the change. He felt a sense of renewed energy in his new role. He reflected:

Now being here for 13 years, 11 of those building relationships with 40 youth every season. And to try to make sure that those relationships stay strong and you're still connected with all these folks. Still trying to find time to meet, hangout, catch up. Like in a one on one way. At least for me, I think it was something that was really good for me to stop. Because I am a huge relationships person, I was just getting overwhelmed.

Developing long-term caring relationships was so central to Sam's understanding of his work identity that he worried about burning out. Therefore, the change to systems level work and adult mentorship was both an exciting and necessary transition. He felt that his new role prevented him from further emotional burnout while also giving him a sense of peace in continuing to nurture the existing relationships that he has developed over past decade.

Coping Strategy: Self-Care Practices

To prevent emotional burnout, youth workers ultimately set boundaries between work and home life and actively engaged in taking care of themselves. This was slightly easier to do when youth workers decided to take on supervisory or management roles in which their frontline staff took more of the emergency calls from young people; therefore, this work continued to happen. While exiting organizations and renegotiating personal and

professional boundaries were also in the name of self-preservation, youth workers shared several emotional, familial, spiritual, and material ways in which they centered self-care rituals as a way to avoid emotional burnout from working long hours in potentially high stress situations with young people, as well as in toxic work environments in which they felt underappreciated by management.

For Nicole, who had repeatedly encountered toxic work environments, I asked her what allowed her to persevere. Nicole told me she drew on her spirituality, her emotional practices, and therapeutic knowledge to stay grounded:

Prayer. Prayer was big. It got so bad...I was sharing an office with the Program Manager that kinda held a lot of the negativity. It started with her, unfortunately. However, you know how they say “hurt people hurt?” being in the human service field helped me to really understand that hurt people hurt, and I understood where the hurt was coming from. I understood where the micromanagement was coming from. I understood that there was some things going on in her personal life that made her bitter and miserable and angry, and she was just spreading it through the whole building. It does not make it okay, yet I had to take my time to really understand where it's coming from.

Nicole drew strength and resolve from her spirituality. This process included perspective taking and avoiding internalizing the negativity. By considering how “hurt people hurt,” Nicole redirected her colleague’s energy. This allowed her to focus on her work with young people.

Self-care practices became an essential persistence strategy to avoid burnout for many youth workers. In recognizing their own sense of fatigue or a sense of detachment,

some youth workers began to value the importance of boundaries that may have initially shirked on entry into the field. Josué, a thirty year-old Black youth worker from Haiti who works at Adin Youth Program, talked about the way in which his understanding of boundaries has evolved over the years, and how he tries to encourage his staff to make sure to re-center over the weekends. During both of our interviews, Josué brought his tiny dog with him, a recent decision to ensure self-care in his life. He said:

Once I put that alarm at the door at the end of the night, I leave work stuff until the next day. Or at least I try to. There'll be something, obviously, that is pressing or days like today where I'm like, I need to go in, when I'm not supposed to be there...I tell staff, once you walk through those doors, find a way that you can leave any problems at the door, then you can pick it up tomorrow. Just like if you have issues at home, or issues in your personal life, you walk through those doors ... Try to pause them, try to put them somewhere, and if you can't definitely communicate and let us know how we can support you, but it's best that you keep both worlds separate.

Deepa: Do you feel like you have arrived at this place [in your career], where you feel that, “I need to have more of these boundaries so I can replenish?” Or do you feel like that was kind of how you always approached youth work?

Josué: It's kind of evolved, just because of the way I use my time, and the way that it's so spread out, and kind of in chunks. So, it naturally allowed me to be able to have that balance. But I know a lot of people on day one walk in, and [they say] “oh this is the best job I've ever had. I can't stop thinking about those kids. I just can't wait to come here.” I was like, “Yes, this is good. Make sure you're

taking care of yourself. When you're not thinking about that workshop, what are you doing with your significant other? What are you doing to make sure that when you come in on Monday...Because you have two days for yourself, and five days with those young people. So, what are you doing on those two days so that you can last through the week?"

Self-care was particularly important, not just because of emotional burnout from supporting youth in need, but also because of the ways in which youth workers felt harmed by institutional devaluation and negative adult behavior. Youth workers talked about the power of gratitude journaling, prayer, adopting a pet, family time, travel, and exercise as ways in which they recharged. Others shared drinks with fellow friends in the field or made sure to buy themselves something special as a self-affirmation. Youth workers also offered powerful metaphors for the ways in which they approached self-care in the field

Thien, a 33 year-old Vietnamese-American youth worker, who worked at DreamBig, talked about how “filling her well” has become her personal mantra when she feels consumed by work demands:

There's someone by the name of Carrie Stack who is a motivational speaker, and she used to work a lot with our organization. She came for a training. And something that I always remember is she says, “fill your well.” If you don't fill your well, it's going to be dried up and there's going to be cobwebs and there's nothing for you to give. You're always giving. So if you don't fill your well then you have no water to give, nothing to give. It was a great analogy, so to fill my well she had said, “Think of something that makes you happy.”

Before, Thien decided that “filling her well” was getting a manicure. “Now, I roll my eyes at that,” she told me, because it was easy to push aside for the program task at hand. Acknowledging that she often left work at 8pm, she missed out on time with her 2 year-old son in the evening. So “filling her well” has changed since new motherhood, and now includes spending time with her family, and prioritize time with her son. Thien also realized that she needed to “do” something for herself. One of these decisions has been to attend a regular Weight Watchers meeting that is at 7:30. This forces Thien to leave work at 7pm. She shared, “I love it. It's for me. My husband can't relate, and that's totally fine, and my son doesn't need to relate, and that's great, but it's for me, but it kind of forces me to push me out the door, and that's my something.” Thien laughed, reflecting on her self-care practice as “attending another meeting when my day is full of meetings,” but she is certainly not alone in feeling that she oftentimes neglected her own health as a youth worker. Many persisters talked about how they forgot to drink water and failed to get adequate exercise and eat healthy meals (unless it was immediately connected to their work with youth). Derrick similarly reflected on a time when he had been a youth worker for a few years and stopped thinking about his own health. He was physically and emotionally exhausted and was coping by drinking with his friends and taking on extra jobs:

Really important lesson I learned... You gotta be selfish to be selfless. That was my biggest problem when I first started in the field. I was so invested. I got to help all these kids, and I got to solve these problems and this and that. I wasn't taking care of my own health. Forget about mental health. The physical and mental health are connected, but I wasn't taking care of myself. When I started

taking care of myself more, I was a better program coordinator. I was better at my job, because I was looking at, "Hey, what do I need to do to fix me so I can look at you?"

Derrick began to exercise and eat healthier food; when his friends noticed the change in his mood and energy, he responded to them, "I'm in my Renaissance." He remarked that there was no way of separating his plan to be healthier from his work with young people; so he embraced that his youth participants would be involved and invited them to his workouts at the local Y, pick-up basketball games, and sessions at a local boxing club. For him, self-care was still a community-oriented endeavor.

Interpersonal Barriers: Growing Out

Several youth workers felt parental and an internalized pressure to leave the field in search of more secure work. The parental pressure to not even enter the youth work profession was apparent for several of my respondents, but it was particularly prevalent among youth workers from immigrant families and youth workers of color. For example, even as early as undergraduate majors, some youth workers discussed their parents' wanting them to go into medicine or law. Nicole, who ultimately attained a degree in psychology, explained the pressures from her family to choose another degree as a teenager when entering college: "In my culture, you're either a nurse, a lawyer, or a doctor, and that's it. Those are the only acceptable careers that anyone can go into in my [Haitian] culture. So I had to go into nursing."

While youth workers' parents sought security and class mobility for their children, this pressure to go into a different career path prolonged experienced youth workers' time in college, most acutely for youth workers of color from various immigrant

backgrounds — Nicole, Carlos, Aminata, Sam, and Thien. (See Methods Chapter).

Nicole ultimately left her nursing program to continue her passion for youth work, only later completing her degree in psychology. However, Nicole understood that this initial pressure from her mother stemmed from a pragmatic parental desire for their child's financial stability as well as the aspiration of intergenerational socioeconomic mobility:

All she kept asking is, "Can you really survive off this money?" Her concern was, she's a single mom; I'm a single mom. Her concern was, can I actually have a life? As a mother, you want the best for your child, right? You want them to be better, to see what areas that you didn't and go further. For my mom, she struggled financially to support me and my brother. Even though she put us through Catholic school by herself, working two jobs. She understood the fact that her presence of not being in our lives as much as she should affected us. We also understood, she had to do that in order for us to live. She bought a house by herself, she's doing all these things and struggling to support us. She didn't want me to have to go through the same struggles she did. Even though she understood my love for it, her concerns were, "Is this really going to support you financially? I need you to be realistic about it."

Aminata felt similar pressures from her family to move on from youth work, although it was her father who convinced her to apply to Farm4Justice's youth programming as a reluctant teenager. She acknowledged that she was able to juggle several jobs because she was living at home with her parents, and it would not be sustainable to stay in youth work for too long without moving into a management position. She spoke to the tension, the "push and pull" of persisting as a youth worker at Farm4Justice in negotiation with her

parents, feeling both fulfilled by her work while recognizing the merit in her parents' concerns:

My parents want me to be financially secure. That's what their hope is for me, because they want to go back to Africa. They're like, "we want you to be good before we go." They're happy I love what I do, and they want more from me as well. It's this push and pull where I'm like "I'm satisfied. I know I'll get there"...Right now they're like, "you need to find a better job that pays you more so you don't have to work two jobs." I hear that. I hear that. It's kind of a weird push and pull.

For Sam, Aminata's youth work mentor, who understood his youth work as deeply connected to agricultural sustainability and community building aspects of the job, he knew that his work choice was confusing for his family, who had immigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan to seek financial opportunity:

It took my family like six years to really understand what I'm doing, because my family has a history of some rice farming, and they are just like "Why are you going back to farming when we're trying to go away from it for generations?" They're like, "You should be a doctor. What are you doing?" It's been a long process [helping them understand].

While some youth workers felt pressure from their families that frustrated them, reinforcing the idea that their chosen work was "low status," some believed that what made them feel most connected to youth was their own youthfulness. Subsequently, because this form of identity capital (i.e. the reflective and corrective calling) was significant to their work, these youth workers wondered out loud about the natural

progression away from direct-service to supervisory roles, or had already reflected on this transition. For example, Nate reflected on his ability to connect with young people because he's able to play soccer with them, his near peer status, and a level of flexibility that changes over time. He confessed, "I think part of what makes me very good at my job right now is my age. I wouldn't have the freedom if I have a kid or I live in the suburbs or something like that. I can't do all of this stuff. I can't be as connected and as available as I am." Nate noticed that he was the only full time direct-service youth worker on staff at NetPositive, which afforded him time to build trust with youth. Most recently, one of his star soccer players disclosed his undocumented status to him. Nate reflected on his immediate response to find a way for this youth to stay in the U.S., and the flexibility he had to go with this youth to meet with a lawyer because his mother did not speak English. "We went to a meeting with the immigration law center, and they said, 'You could potentially be waiting a few hours.' I was like, 'Okay, that sucks, but I can do it.' I don't have to pick someone up or do anything. I'll just tell my roommate I won't be home."

Coping Strategy: Involving Families in the Work

Several youth workers talked about the ways in which they included their families and friends in their experience so that they could better understand the value of the work and share the joy that it brought them. As Rose explained to me, it takes a "special kind of family" to support youth workers in both financial and emotional ways, but youth workers also actively encouraged their families to better understand their work and get them "on board" as well. For instance, Rika, whose parents were seasonal street vendors in Adin, both relied on her parents and involved them and her friends in her youth work at

Eliot OurHouse. When I asked her about whether her parents and friends understood her work, she responded:

My parents [are involved], because they'll pick me up, because I don't have a car. They have a really junky car with rolling windows. My dad got a silver [car], so he could duct tape it. You can still see there's a dent. I'd bring them in to different events so they could see what's going on. I think my mom's side of the family, I think part of, not that she's super Jewish, but everybody's about social justice, and my dad's side of the family [from Indonesia], too, and they used to take me to different things for school committee and voting was really important. So, I think they get [why I do the work]. For friends, I've pulled all my friends in to volunteer to tutor SAT, to be there for career days, so I pull them in so people get to see what I do. Then I explain it, but I just get really excited.

Similar to many of the youth workers I interviewed, Rika believed that she gained her social justice principles from family members, but also included them in the work so that they could both materially and morally support her.

Beyond extending the joys and legitimacy of youth work to families, involving family members, particularly children, was an essential strategy to persist for working parents. Youth workers found ways to involve their children in the program so they did not have to seek costly childcare. Youth workers such as Emilia, Nicole and Pablo shared that it was critical that their organizations allowed them to either enroll their children in programs or occasionally bring them on site during the evenings. Interestingly, not all community organizations were amenable to this arrangement; some organizations

required youth workers to pay to enroll their own child, or others creating policies to restrict youth workers' children from attending.

Coping Strategy: Advancing to Management

Most of my interview participants had already advanced to coordinator or manager positions after only a few years on the job as a youth leader. This was a critical and common method of persisting in the work. Coordinator and manager positions were typically full-time, salaried jobs that may still include a good amount of direct-service work, but also entails staff supervision and administrative duties (e.g. grant writing and reporting, managing family and community relationships). Advancement often meant a move from part-time to full-time and offered more leadership, agency, voice, and financial stability within the organization. Some of my participants, like Xiomara and Omar, had created organizations themselves, and so they were oftentimes traversing several roles —educator, mentor, fundraiser, and manager — all at once.

By the time I started my formal interviews with Nicole, she had just started a new job, as a university service-learning director, in which she supervises college students who are running afterschool programs across Eliot and Adin. She still missed her youth and families from West Eliot Middle School, but she shared her enthusiasm to mentor young adults and develop curriculum and trainings for young youth workers in her new role. She was also excited to enroll in graduate coursework at Adin University, an advantage of working at the college. I asked about where Nicole might see herself in a few years, she told me, “I’m not going anywhere! I’m getting a pension.”

While for some youth workers, moving to a coordinator or manager position felt like a natural growth opportunity to expand their skillsets, others felt like they were

compelled to leave a direct-service position sooner than they would like in order to make more money. When I asked Aminata what her job title was Farm4Justice, she actively cringed saying her own title out loud: “youth development specialist.” The word “specialist” bothered her; she called it “fancy.” I encouraged her to explain why this term troubled her. At the age of 25, five years of youth work, Aminata felt like she was just getting started in her career. She contended that the word specialist should be devoted to someone with “a doctorate, for example,” or “several years of experience and knowledge on a topic.” Aminata acknowledged that even though she would love to continue hone her mentorship skills as the “youth development specialist,” she would likely seek a coordinator or management position at Farm4Justice or elsewhere within the next year, primarily for financial reasons.

Similar to Aminata, youth workers in their twenties and early thirties acknowledged the inevitability of being financially pushed out of direct-service work, across levels of education and socioeconomic backgrounds. Looking to the future, many explicitly acknowledged that if they were to have children or want to buy a home, they would have to find a way to move into nonprofit management, which entailed less time with youth (if they had not already) or work on teacher certification. For example, Nate shared:

I can't imagine a better job for me, and I do want to move up and eventually be making more money if I want to lead the type of life that I intend to lead...I want to have kids. I didn't have to take out student loans. I don't want them to take out student loans. I want to own a house eventually...I don't have a five-year plan or anything like that....and be able to take them on vacation, stuff like my parents

were able to provide for me. So eventually, that means — there aren't that many full-time positions here— somehow going back to school to move to the executive side of this organization.

This feeling of an “inevitable” advancement as a way to stay in youth work was a familiar experience for Thien, who accepted a mentoring coordinator position a few years ago at DreamBig. She began at the organization as an intern and then paid as an Americorps employee. In thinking back to her earlier Americorps position, Thien wondered about the ways in which she could have learned to improve her role as a facilitator of the youth council group if she had a few more years in this role. But later, after we had finished our formal interview, she opened up about her short maternity leave, and she recanted the regret, because she remembered why she agreed to her current position, which is a now two jobs: staff supervisor and mentor coordinator, folded into one job:

“DreamBig has really bad maternity leave, and it’s a program focused on girls becoming strong women! How can DreamBig not be supportive of women? Organizations have to take care of their people - I have to take care of my people. I don’t regret it [taking the promotion].”

Thien decided that her family was as important as the girls she worked with. She wanted to stay at DreamBig in any capacity possible, but not at the expense of a salary that could help support her family. “Can I write down our conversation?” I asked her, as I had just turned off the recorder. She agreed it was an important story to tell about why youth workers have to make these moves away from direct work, but also to highlight the hypocrisy of social service agencies that don’t have family friendly policies.

Conclusion: The Precarious Nature of Persistence

In this chapter, I discussed the most salient social conditions and barriers that emerged in interviews with persisters. They felt financially “pushed out” by gentrification and student loan debt, organizationally “shut out” from decision-making and agency, emotionally “burned out” from the boundaryless culture of youth work, as well as pressured to “grow out” of the work based on their families’ expectations and their own concerns about their ability to stay in the work. Persisters did not always have to face all of these issues, however, it was apparent that Black and Latinx youth workers, as well as low-income, immigrant, or parent youth workers, were quite prominent voices in this particular analysis. However, even White middle class persisters shared the ways in which they navigated these barriers, some acknowledging their privilege and ability to afford doing this work that were also related to their life stage (e.g. not having children, living close to place of work). These social, organizational, occupational, and interpersonal influences expose the precarious nature of youth worker persistence.

In response to these barriers, youth workers shared a range of coping strategies to respond to the dilemmas at hand. These strategies — adding multiple jobs, job-hopping, self-care practices (e.g. creating boundaries), and advancing to management, were driven by persisters’ sense of community calling. It is important to consider the ways in which intrinsic motivations, beliefs, and understandings of youth work cultivated this range of coping strategies. For example, persisters did not see their movement between organizations as a sign of their disinterest or their sense of competence as a youth worker. Rather, they understood these moves as ways to maintain attachments to their occupational identity and preserve their belief systems. As seen in this chapter, some youth workers navigated barriers by changing their jobs every few years. The reasons for

job-hopping varied; however, across these examples, it was clear that persisters were trying to maintain both morality and dignity that was central to their occupational identity. When persisters found themselves at ethical odds with organizational management, repeatedly compromising their beliefs and ideals, they found it necessary to move to another position in youth work. Job-hopping, therefore, was indicative of a kind of career persistence, rather than a sign of weak attachment to their work identity. Additionally, self-care practices were typically healthy strategies for youth workers to engage in, as it allowed them to understand the value of some boundaries, thus making them better fit to support young people while on the job.

While persisters' use of coping strategies reveal the sincere, and at times stubborn, pursuit of a youth work career, most of these decisions came at an individual and familial toll as well. Several interviewees held additional jobs, accepted lower salaries, relied on partner's earnings, prolonged financial dependence on parents, and extended their time and entry into college and graduate school. In the face of low wages, long hours, and rare mentorship opportunities, it is often the case that "persistence" became "subsistence." The personal costs and educational concessions made in pursuit of youth work are worthy of continued investigation, particularly for youth workers of color, those from low-income households, and those who had yet to attain their bachelor's degree. Several extrinsic factors — such as the need for livable wages, healthcare benefits, affordable childcare options, college opportunities, housing, as well as on-site and off-site professional learning opportunities to grow in the work — made it challenging for even these "persisters" to imagine lifetime careers working in youth organizations.

Chapter 6: “It’s Not Just Me”: The Possibilities and Limitations of Extrinsic Supports

Emilia and I met for our first interview in the front lobby of DreamBig, a buttery yellow wood-sided building that was renovated a decade ago from its original use as the Glasford public high school in the 1800s. Warm and formal in her welcome, Emilia had one of the longest and most continuous professional trajectories in youth work among the practitioners whom I interviewed. A 50-year-old White youth worker, Emilia was an “organizational lifer”: her whole 30-year career thus far had been within DreamBig, a local chapter of a national network of afterschool programs focused on the empowerment of girls through academic and social support. Similar to Jane Addams’ Hull House of Chicago, Glasford DreamBig has deep roots in the area; it was founded over a century ago when afterschool clubs and programs were exclusively for boys. Emilia believed that DreamBig fostered her professional identity, affirming her worth and contributions through engaged, high-quality supervision and learning opportunities. Through organizational and professional supports, Emilia’s community calling was reinforced, and she came to understand her choice of work as not just personal whimsy or a luxury. In recalling one of the first professional events she attended, a time when she was surrounded by a community of youth workers like herself, she shared her realization that “it’s not just me”: there were others like her who saw their work as a community calling and career path.

However, while extrinsic supports from DreamBig allowed Emilia to engage with her calling through a sense of belonging and continued learning, over the years she also relied on another set of extrinsic supports: her family. Her husband’s workplace covered her health benefits and a retirement plan. These were critical extrinsic supports that

proved necessary for her persistence as well. They allowed Emilia to continue in her calling, to “make a difference” in the lives of young girls and “push the needle on gender equity.”

In this chapter, I explore the extrinsic influences and supports that encourage youth workers’ occupational identity and persistence. I also consider the limitations of these supports, as exemplified by persisters transitioning out of the field. Whereas youth workers’ community callings were a central intrinsic motivation for persistence, leading to a host of coping strategies in the face of barriers, *extrinsic* dimensions of support—such as professional and organizational resources along with families—offered critical resources that were necessary for other facets of occupational identity. Youth workers’ occupational identity and persistence were additionally replenished by affirmations of their work by their youth participants and their families. I argue that naming these external dimensions—both the formal and informal ones—are important in understanding how youth workers’ sense of belonging, learning, and value are necessary fuel for persistence.

I begin this chapter by highlighting some of the key experiences of “organizational lifers,” a label I use to describe those, like Emilia, who have worked at the same organization for the totality of their youth worker experience or for ten or more years. I then thematically share key professional, organizational, and interpersonal supports that youth workers identified as helping them to channel these callings, affirm their worth, and encourage persistence. I then consider the limitations of current extrinsic supports by exploring Emilia’s dilemma of how to retain youth workers of color and a broader analysis of younger persisters’ plans to exit youth work. I argue that nonprofits

ultimately rely on callings and those who afford to do the work. This dependence, I suggest, perpetuates inequality in who can stay in this workforce, and reinforces intergenerational poverty for persisters from low-income backgrounds.

Organizational Lifers

“Organizational lifers” are persisters who either remained at the same organization for the duration of their career or who spent a lengthy amount of time (ten or more years) at the same organization. Emilia at DreamBig, Rose at Wheatley OurHouse, and Omar at Pontu Cape Verde are examples of lifers (in Omar’s case, he created his organization); Sam, Derrick, and Rika also worked at their respective organizations—Farm4Justice, YouthActNow, and OurHouse—for ten years or more. While all persisters discussed extrinsic dimensions of support, the lifers demonstrated the power of organizational and professional support, with room for agency, in cultivating their identity and commitment over the course of their career. Interestingly, lifers were all people who had experienced more traditional advancement into more management positions and staff supervision roles. For example, Omar, a youth worker who began his program with a \$7000 budget, marked success through the number of youth served, a growing staff, and other traditional indicators of “growth.”

Within this group of persisters, organizational lifers tended to either enter organizations with a curriculum that they could learn from and engage with, or feel that they had agency to create a program with flexibility and creativity. For example, Sam, a 36-year-old Taiwanese-American youth worker, shared that when he started at Farm4Justice thirteen years ago, there was an existing youth development curriculum focused on social justice and community-building that he could adapt. Prior to this job

experience, Sam had not worked with high school youth in an out-of-school time program. However, he felt supported to move forward in the work, telling me, “[Farm4Justice] felt I had the capacity to learn and grow.” Sam believed that having an implementation manual, focused on both youth and farming, gave him a foundational script to eventually build his own style around. However, this included engaged oversight from one of the organization’s leaders, which ultimately became the on-the-job mentorship that he needed to grow:

I felt pretty prepared. Ran it to the T. [My co-leader] also had a manual that we both looked at this together. The founder would come and watch us to make sure things were going well. We ran it exactly how the book says, and then our supervisor would be like, “that wasn't quite how it should happen.” And, we're just like, oh. “It's exactly what it said in the book.”

Over time, Sam became less dependent on the manual and more at ease with his role with youth based on ongoing feedback and support from the organization’s leadership.

Indeed, while the manual offered a starting point and set of lessons and activities, it was the role of engaged supervisors and an organizational culture of feedback loops that encouraged Sam’s learning and sense of professional identity. Sam’s supervisors would frequently conduct observations, and provide immediate constructive feedback through “pluses” (positive comments) and “deltas” (areas in need of change) that gave Sam a sense of growing experience and expertise. These feedback loops were a mainstay of Farm4Justice’s culture, and Sam would utilize this strategy in turn with the young people employed in his program. Even the founder would receive feedback from staff through this process. This kind of intergenerational learning and accountability was, as

Sam described it, “core to the DNA” of the organization. Sam believed that through accountability to one another across ages, issues of power could be addressed and dismantled, and he could see his work continually improving in line with an ethic of care. Over time, Sam also learned more about the organization’s history, one focused on building community and engaging in race conversations through farming and food. Developing this connection and bond to the organizational history and mission, and feeling attachment to this purpose, supported Sam’s sense of calling to help others and provided a home for this purpose.

Whereas Sam felt that the scripted curriculum at Farm4Justice offered him ways to ground his work, and ultimately his approach as a youth worker, Derrick, a 35-year-old White youth worker, felt that YouthActNow was a less structured organization that he had ownership in changing. He had the opportunity to create programming with support from the executive director. When I asked Derrick about YouthActNow’s curriculum, he called it “a reference book” that offered a variety of community and teambuilding activities for young people. Derrick believed that the organization director valued his local, place-based expertise, and that this allowed for him to grow and have agency in his role. The organizational culture was one in which youth workers were expected to grow on the job, and in which there was room for mistakes as well. In his current position as a supervisor to young youth workers, Derrick reflected on this approach:

You know I'm working here and I'm working toward the right thing, but I'm not necessarily always doing the right thing, which makes me very sympathetic to my staff person. He's the same exact age I was and he's made a few mistakes and I

just see like other people might fire him for certain things, and I'm just like “he’s on the path to doing the right and good thing.”

Based on the examples of Sam and Derrick, it is clear that “lifers” felt connected to the missions and generally embraced the cultures of their organizations. They cared about the history and approach of the programs, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, were oftentimes youth-centered and social justice-oriented in their priorities. They described their organizations as multigenerational learning spaces, and while Sam and Derrick faced ongoing challenges and concerns in their roles, they also felt that they grew as youth workers through these different types of organizational structures. Finally, their experiences suggest that there is a tension between feeling prepared and experiencing a kind of ownership of the work that cannot be scripted. Whereas Sam started with a script that over time he could personalize to his own approach, Derrick started with a reference guide, and over time, created a more scaffolded set of resources for his younger youth workers.

Some lifers had more explicit opportunities for training, professional learning, and ultimately, advancement within the organization. These organizations were ones that embedded training and learning opportunities into their structure. Youth workers shared how these opportunities ultimately fostered connections to a broader professional community. Below, I share how Emilia’s professional growth at DreamBig allowed her to see her identity as a youth worker as a collective and professional one. This understanding and reminder of her worth—captured by her words, “it’s not just me”—explains the power of professional networks of learning and community in buoying identity and persistence in the field.

When Emilia first joined DreamBig, she already felt different in her choices in comparison to her peers. She commented, “People did not go into this thinking they were going to do it for long term. I would say the majority of college-age students did it as a part-time job. Then, when they graduated they went into whatever they majored in.” During the 1980s, Emilia felt unusual in her choice of work, moving from her English major into education. Without too many external resources at the time, Emilia relied on her interests and developed a community calling at Glasford DreamBig.

However, intra- and extra-organizational networks offered professional support and camaraderie, and introduced Emilia to common language around working in youth development and out-of-school time. For example, Emilia remembered the first time she took a formal curriculum development workshop at a DreamBig Program Directors Convening. She described it as part “this is how you supervise people,” part “this is the mission of DreamBig” as well as, “this is our approach to programming and these are our national programs.” Attending the convening allowed Emilia to tap into several resources that were less accessible to her in her role during the eighties and nineties (when the program did not have the internet). Utilizing resources from the convening, Emilia was able to develop guidelines for youth leaders. She remarked on the move toward intentionality in the work:

We have come a long way from using the [model of] “coming up with a theme and have some fun activities” to really thinking through outcomes with the girls. We now think about what knowledge, skills, attitudes are we going to change? Have we affected them when they leave this program? What's going to be different about them? Thinking about how we're preparing for each activity, how

the room's going to look, what materials we need. Making it much more intentional towards reaching the goals for the girls, while still having fun. Trainings like the Program Directors Convening offered concrete, research-driven practices that informed Emilia's everyday work.

Furthermore, finding a community of professionals at DreamBig national conferences fostered Emilia's pride and attachment to her occupational identity. In all, these events confirmed her work choice beyond construction of the work as a luxury or fluke, but as work that had greater purpose, intentionality, and worth. She confessed:

[Initially] I felt a little bad about indulging myself by staying in this field, because you're not making a lot of money, but I'm really doing something I enjoy. I felt like that [indulgent], up until I met other people in the youth work who actually had been in just as long, if not longer, than I had. So I was like, "Okay, so it's not just me that really likes this and has a real commitment to it." But, up until then [meeting other youth work professionals], I felt like people probably didn't really take me seriously.

Emilia's words here are striking. She believed that her work in the community was imperative and a part of her social justice-driven community calling, while simultaneously worrying that it was indulgent to stay in the field. This dual framing of the work as necessary for youth but also a personal luxury for adults was a sentiment I heard frequently among youth workers with family members (e.g. children, partners, parents) to support. In the following section, I feature three key areas of extrinsic support that encouraged occupational identity development and longer-term commitments across my sample.

Extrinsic Supports

Organizational lifers illuminated the complexity and range of external factors that support persistence for youth workers. Their devotion to the work was still fueled by community callings, however extrinsic support factors at the professional, organizational, and interpersonal support conferred a sense of belonging, new learning, and both material and moral value. As Figure 7, below, indicates, the external dimensions of youth worker persistence fall into three major categories: professional, organizational, and interpersonal, which I now discuss more fully.



Figure 7: Persisters' Extrinsic Supports

Professional Support

Many persisters shared that career mentors and communities of professional practice supported and nourished their sense of belonging, learning, and value. In particular, career mentorship and networks cultivated a *professional identity* in which good work was made visible and could be observed, exchanged, and shared. Professional supports were ones that offered opportunities to gain knowledge of research and strategies that could be transferred back into their work with young people. These kinds of social and learning supports were essential to staying motivated and inspired in the work.

It was noteworthy that the identity connections between youth workers and youth (reflective and corrective callings), discussed in Chapter 4, also occurred in the ways that youth workers described their career mentors as “near peers.” In ways that recall the famous quote from Marian Wright Edelman, “It’s hard to be what you can’t see,” participants shared that they were able to imagine and see themselves as career youth workers because of their career mentors.

A few interview participants truly cherished their first supervisors’ support, seeing these youth workers as career mentors as well. For example, when I asked Emilia about whom her biggest inspiration was, her voice quavered, “That’s a really good question. I’m going to get emotional, because when I think about it, it’s my first supervisor, Lindsay.” Emilia continued:

She was...is a few years older. She was just really inspirational. I just really respected her and really admired her ability to work with the girls, her intellect, and her caring. We did a lot of the STEM programming back then. She really was a champion for us introducing STEM programming to the girls, and I thought that was pretty cool because the girls love doing it. It was just a matter of them having the opportunity to do it. So, Lindsay was probably one of my biggest influences.

Like the “reflective and corrective” callings¹ that youth workers shared that drew them to the work, I interpreted Emilia’s narration of her experience as a young youth worker looking up to Lindsay as both a form of motivation as well as an imagination of a possible self. For Emilia, Lindsay was an immediate role model of what youth work looks like in practice.

¹ seeing younger versions of themselves in their youth and feeling committed to help them navigate adolescence

Carlos, who worked as the poetry education coordinator at ModernArt Consortium Museum (MAC) at the time of our interview, described another example of a near peer mentor experience. Carlos, a 30-year-old Latinx youth worker, grew up in the working-class city of Brennan. As a young person, he aspired to be a hip-hop performer and would oftentimes attend open mic nights hosted by Together, a local youth nonprofit, for a chance to perform his poetry and free style. It was through performing at these events that he met Mateo, Together's program director. Mateo later offered Carlos his first part-time youth work position at the drop-in youth center. Carlos connected with Mateo and agreed to take on this job, commenting: "[Mateo] was also Puerto Rican, only 10 years older than I was. He saw a lot of himself in me, which is funny 'cause I see a lot of myself in him." During his first full year on the job as an Americorp member, Carlos participated in a series of trainings facilitated by Mateo that shaped his own approach youth work. As Carlos retold this experience, he paused and stated emphatically, "Everything I learned about youth work, I learned from Mateo." Carlos vividly recalled these early trainings:

One thing that Mateo did very well was it was never a situation where it was like, "All right, you sit down and I'm gonna give you all the information." It wasn't ever that. He did a lot of setting up certain frameworks and then allowing us to experiment in it, right? So he would do a lot of role-playing. Mateo is an actor in a past life, he uses a lot of humor as well. He's a funny dude, or at least knows how to transfer the energy in the room, right? So he knows how to either have the energy be on him and not have it be a, "Look at me, look at me," thing. It's just like, he's just facilitating in the moment. Or he was able to give someone else the

energy and let them take over. So that was something I was observing and watching. But these activities, he would just place us in positions that he knew we would eventually find ourselves in, working with young people, and created those scenarios. We would do the role-play and then debrief afterwards.

Mateo's trainings were evidence to Carlos that expertise, practice, and being genuine were all that was needed to engage youth in activities. Carlos began to appreciate the intentionality brought into the out-of-school time programs, and to see the value of this learning and style as part of his own practice.

When Carlos moved on from Together to create a spoken word nonprofit in the city of Brennan, he felt comfortable reaching out to Mateo with questions about his youth work approach and about how to navigate managing an education nonprofit. He hoped to continue in Mateo's footsteps. Now, as a more experienced youth worker, Carlos continued to view Mateo as not only a mentor, but also an important friend who appreciated him and encouraged him in his choices. The understanding of youth work and belief in its power that Mateo provided became particularly important in times when Carlos felt that his parents or siblings discouraged him from persisting. At the time of our interviews, Carlos was planning his wedding, and he told me proudly that Mateo was going to be a groomsman. For Carlos, support from a meaningful mentor was about both professional and personal moral uplift when he questioned his path.

Youth workers also discussed mentors from college and universities, as well as racial affinity groups, as supports for them in their professional paths. Several youth workers talked about the role of completing both undergraduate and graduate degrees as signals of their professional value and commitment. They talked about inspiring

professors of education, social work, and youth work who validated their callings, supplied them with sociological and psychological terms to discuss the systems and people they engage with, and informed their practice.

External professional validation mattered to youth workers, who oftentimes heavily relied on their sense of calling and personal coping. Ollie, who doubted her belonging as a first-generation college-going student and as a youth worker at a prestigious graduate school of education, felt surprised and extremely validated in her youth work approach by her program when she received an “Intellectual Contribution” award. She chuckled as she told me that her family still did not fully understand her identification as a youth worker, but that they gladly boasted about her degree and accolade from a prestigious university. Josué and Gerard felt that professional networks and support came from higher education affinity groups and associations for Black men that had an ethos around giving back to their communities. These affiliations that confirmed and affirmed their callings and persistence were ones that provided solace and community for their work.

Some interview participants shared that their professional mentors in youth work were *their* youth workers when they were youth participants, such as Xiomara and Pablo. In these cases, their relationships to mentors changed, evolved, and deepened as they moved from the dynamics of a youth-adult relationship, to a professional or collegial one, and eventually to a bond of adult friendship.

Youth workers such as Ollie and Derrick shared that city networks, such as one developed in Winterton, allowed them to identify place-based and professional issues

occurring in their work. Ollie remembered when she first joined the Winterton Network as a young youth worker:

That was the hugest resource for me, in terms of being able to develop partnerships and more robust programming, was I would go to those meetings and be like, hey, we're working on this project. Anyone want to help? That's how I made friends with Derrick, and started working with him a lot.

Christina, a 29-year-old White youth worker, similarly found inspiration through a regional OurHouse network for program directors. Professional program networks, such as the ones like DreamBig and OurHouse held, allowed practitioners to visit each other's programs and learn about new curriculum. Youth workers discussed these professional networks — both place-based and programmatic—as ways to identify and learn about new positions and job advancement opportunities outside of their sites. For Christina, attending monthly meetings allowed her to meet Rose, who works at Wheatley OurHouse. She began shadowing Rose as a kind of apprenticeship.

Through this shadowing experience, Christina learned about a unique writing program in Wheatley focused on group work and shared vulnerability. When I asked Christina about this writing program and its impact on her that she described as a transformative, she responded:

It was 20-person cohort of educators that I was part of. Some people were teachers some were professors, some were community workers, activists like librarians all different kinds of stuff. Even if there had been no training, being exposed and part of this group that was so diverse in terms of like age, gender, race. Every nationality, people from all over the world. Even just being part of

this group of people that were so passionate about youth work and social justice.

Just talking to people on what they are doing, that would have been more than enough.

Christina's description of this program shows the diversity of professionals that she found connection to as a youth worker. As discussed in "boundaryless" constructions of youth work, it was perhaps not surprising that this social justice and community oriented cohort was the kind of belonging and learning that Christina needed as nourishment for her youth worker identity.

These extrinsic supports were particularly valuable in fostering a sense of belonging for youth workers while also offering new learning. At times isolated in their responsive work with youth, persisters lit up when I invited them to discuss transformative professional learning opportunities. They felt recharged by these types of practitioner-driven spaces and inspired by their mentors. Networks and learning opportunities combined inspired youth workers' persistence.

Organizational Support

Although discussion of organizations always revealed room for improvement, some youth workers felt generally supported and valued by their organizations. Organizational support came in the form of financial resources (e.g. raises, benefits); material resources (e.g. on-site supplies, existing curriculum), professional practice resources (e.g. clear and competent supervision, training), and cultural resources (e.g. staff practices that focus on care and equity). Emilia's trajectory at DreamBig exemplified the ways in which she believed her organization fostered a combination of growth opportunities and change, as well as a positive attitude around the role of youth

workers. For Emilia, organizational support at DreamBig was imperfect, but still valuable. Although the resources for salary raises and benefits were limited, Emilia noted how subsidized on-site child and school-age care, paid professional development and trainings, and a community of committed colleagues made DreamBig a supportive environment for her to thrive.

Sam, whom I discussed earlier in the chapter, felt similarly to Emilia. He was first drawn to his organization's existing youth development curriculum centered on racial and food justice, young people's identities, and sense of community. Organization leadership found ways to actively engage and challenge Sam in his work. Recently promoted from a youth program director role to the regional director, Sam's role at the time of our interview was to train and direct youth workers—many whom were former youth in the program—while also building community partnerships with local farmers and schools.

Emilia and Sam also noted that organizations like DreamBig and Farm4Justice were youth-centered in their missions, with organizational supervisors and mentors who understood culturally responsive youth participation and engagement as central to their work. It is important to note that these organizations, which offered more systems of support, were also institutions and communities to which youth workers felt a sense of loyalty. Rika, an “organizational lifer” at Eliot OurHouse, felt similarly. She specified that rather than being motivated by the network of OurHouse across the nation, her persistence mainly derived from an “allegiance” to her “family” (the specific program community comprised of youth and youth workers in Eliot).

I liked the environment, but I think with OurHouse and with volunteering and in general the more that an organization invests in their staff the more their staff will

be invested, and I felt completely connected to that single site but not necessarily the greater club as a whole. So it was really almost an allegiance to the people that were there, and feeling very strongly about those youth that I'd worked with for a long time, even though we have new youth coming in all the time, but it didn't feel like oh I really wish they would hire me...It just seemed like a part of my life that this was my family, and I would go home to my family or something like that.

As evident in Rika's reasoning for her persistence, it is difficult to disentangle what youth workers understood as their organizational, professional, and community attachments. However, it is important to note that that Rika did believe that the culture of her site-based version of OurHouse kept drawing her back. The family feel of her organization cultivated her persistence within it.

Organizational supports fostered youth worker identity and persistence through both material and moral resources. While my sample consisted of many serial job-hoppers, there was another half that saw significant value in their organizations based on the support and unique culture of these contexts. For example, Pablo saw the value of moving from an organization like SafeZone, where he felt disrespected as a full-time youth worker, to CityVisions, an organization that had a system in place that enabled him to feel valued as a part-time employee. Therefore, youth workers' shared that organizational culture and engaged supervision within it are powerful mechanisms that influence trajectories, at times superseding the monetary aspects of the job. Positive organizational cultures created a sense of belonging and "allegiance" — as Rika put it,

conferred value through respect and finances, and cultivated learning and growth opportunities.

Interpersonal Support

In spite of youth workers' frequent mention of their parents as a deterrent to persistence, it was evident that many youth workers' parents also supported their (grown) children in material and emotional ways to stay in the work. Young youth workers like Ernesto, age 24, and Aminata, age 25, lived at home with their parents while paying down student loans, caring for their younger siblings, and affording costs in rapidly gentrifying cities. For youth workers with children of their own, parents oftentimes helped with childcare and transportation. Youth workers' families and close friends also provided sources of inspiration and meaning for the work my research participants did. Many participants, like Claire, Sam, Carlos, Xiomara, and Ollie, shared that their partners understood their commitments, and they provided them with both moral and financial support.

Rose, a 53-year-old White youth worker at Wheatley OurHouse, emphasized to me that it takes a "special family" to support career youth workers. Thinking she would be a lifelong teacher, Rose decided to take a significant pay cut and loss of benefits to work full-time as the education director of Wheatley OurHouse, a comprehensive afterschool program for children and youth. She recounted to me how she engaged her parents in her transition from a teacher at Wheatley Public Schools to her role as a youth worker:

I was already involved with Wheatley OurHouse [part-time] since I started teaching, so [my parents] knew [my supervisors] Joe and Kenny already from

birthday parties and events. So they knew I was taking a pay cut, and how it would affect my retirement I could have had with teaching. They saw me in action and saw everything going on here and how it makes me feel to be here, and they loved it. Because of course, parents, right? They want their children to be happy and to do well, and so I know that *they know* that's what happens here.

That's the thing we talk about here...for people who were married or want to have children...like Joe and Kenny didn't get married for a really long time because of the hours they were working...you have to have a special kind of family to support you. That is, workers at OurHouse, or youth development workers more generally...whether you're married or not married, it has to be a special family to support them in what they do, knowing that they are working hours outside the tradition on-the-clock hours. There's always something that comes up. That's the thing I think about, the families who support the club and what we do here.

For Rose and her colleagues, family assistance in youth work went beyond the material to also include emotional support and logistical flexibility, including waiting years to make major life choices such as marriage. Here, Rose suggested that families must be on board and invested in the choice to persist. This is because of the nature of the work and the ways that personal and professional lines will naturally blur in this field. She also shares the ways in which she observed her colleagues actively choosing youth work over other life choices. She framed these choices as both a sacrifice but also one made because of personal conviction and joy. Conveying this kind of community callings to her parents was critical to make peace with her exit from teaching. Having her parents' support and

affirmation, allowed her to focus her energies on her work rather than the doubts and guilt of leaving a more financially secure job.

Other youth workers talked about the particular ways in which spouses and romantic partners supported their callings and longevity in the field. Thien, a 33-year-old who works at Glasford DreamBig with Emilia, discussed the important forms of moral and financial support that her husband provided for her to pursue her career in youth work. This was particularly significant for Thien, as she was in and out of college for almost nine years. She explained that this prolonged college tenure was in large part because she felt pressure to pursue a medicine related degree as her parents expected of her. Frustrated, Thien would often start and stop classes, changing her major, and working part-time jobs during gaps. Youth development work was not a plan that her parents had supported, nor an area she had a chance to explore since her own youth as a martial arts instructor. However, eventually, with support of her husband, Thien found a psychology degree program and internship opportunity at DreamBig. Over time at DreamBig, Thien found her passion, her calling to work with young girls. However, she also recognized that her husband's support from his technical career (with an associate's degree) allowed her to persist as a youth worker (with a bachelor's degree) even as a new mother. This shaped her understanding of the ways in which youth work was not designed to be a career, particularly in comparison to her husband's vocational path:

I think about this, because we had just had a conversation about it. Someone had asked me, "Are you going to encourage your son to go to college?" I said, "Yeah, of course," but I'm also going to encourage him to do what he wants, as long as he's not...as long as he's healthy, eating, he has money for himself, like not doing

bad things. Because I can't tell him to go to college, because he's going to look at his dad and go, "Well, dad didn't go." Also, like so you can go either way and you can be successful. "You can do what you love like me, maybe not get paid as much, but still have enough money to live. Or you can be like your dad, who also does what he loves and is getting paid a good amount through an alternative college program."

Similar to Emilia, Thien also reflected on the luxury, or in her words, the “blessing,” to do work that she loved through the support of her partner: “As a family, we're taken care of because of [the] job [at a medical research nonprofit] that [my husband] has. I would not be able to do what I do, I don't think, without him, his support financially too. It's always easier with two incomes. I know how blessed I am, because otherwise, I don't know if I'd be able to hold down this and be able to support my son and all that.” These “special families” offered youth workers a chance to work long-term in a precarious profession through financial and socio-emotional care, as well as offering perspective to some on what their work means, as was the case with Thien. These interpersonal supports offered ongoing extrinsic affirmation for youth workers.

Youth and Family Affirmations

Persister, many of who had worked with hundreds of youth through their years of commitment, felt that it was not ever the money, but the gratitude of youth participants and their families that offered as sense of value on the job. For persisters, the gift and blessing of mentoring youth for several years, and into their adult years, was deeply affirming and fulfilling. Oftentimes, this type of long-term mentorship was possible if youth were eventually hired for program assistant and youth leader positions within

organizations. For example, Sam insisted that I talk to his mentee, Aminata at Farm4Justice. He had seen her grow through the programming as a high school student and now as an employee. He felt great pride and affirmation that he was part of her journey. As for Aminata, she continued to look up to Sam as a role model and career mentor, even telling me emphatically, “If Sam goes [leaves Farm4Justice], then I go!”

When organizations became troublesome or unsupportive places, youth workers recalled their efforts to focus on youth participants who needed the most support and guidance as a way to keep the big picture of why they do the work. Despite disappointment in youth service agencies, youth workers like Claire stayed in touch with youth from different organizations she had been part of. Keeping up mentoring relationships with her students functioned as a sustaining affirmation of the goodness and importance of her work. It confirmed for persisters that their attachments and loyalty were to young people and not to adults and organizations.

As Xiomara exited her organization, Lifting Our Voices, she read a letter that one of her youth wrote her:

When I think about you moving on from what you've built here, when I think back over the years of spoken word organizing, I remember what Eliot was like before any of that existed. I grew up here without any concept of youth arts, and then once I became an artist it felt completely removed from the young people who live here. That changed with Lift Our Voices Eliot (LOVE), and I really can't imagine my life without it. I don't know how anyone can measure worth, at least not in a visible way, but I think if that value could be measured by what you built and have given to Eliot youth poetry, it would amount to an unpayable debt. It's

hard for me to imagine why or how you chose to come here and bless us with all of this generosity. My only guess is that there must be a magical connection between [our cities]. Now if we could all just stop losing our best people to [this other city], that would be great.

Affirmations from young people and their communities made “job-hopping.” organizational departures, less difficult. These letters and accolades were reminders that youth workers would stay connected through their mentorship. These kinds of affirmations were a reminder for youth workers that their loyalties were to the young people who would remain a part of their lives rather than the organizations. Similarly, when Nicole decided to leave a community program within a school that she had developed over the years, she said it was not just the kids, but also the parents who were calling her and convincing her to stay. She stayed in touch with several families. These families, and her daughter, continued to shower her with the praise and affirmation that she was lacking from her program supervisors:

I don't think my family understands the depth of things I've done. My daughter does. She sees it and she sees the family. My mom was actually with me when we went to Walmart one of my families were there. The mom came and gave me a big hug and was like, "We miss you!" Another [program] family. "We miss you so much. We miss everything about the program." That's when my mom understood, because [this woman] cried to my mom and said "You don't understand, your daughter helped me in this time of need..." She's telling my mom and now my mom gets it.

Therefore, while youth workers drew on these affirmations as part of their redefining of professional value, youth and families' praise were oftentimes an active, ongoing, and immediate form of validation that motivated youth workers' commitment. In the following section, I return to Emilia, considering the ways in which youth workers who became managers and supervisors were making sense of the changing economic and political landscape and its impact on youth workers.

Designed to Exit: Current Limitations of Extrinsic Supports

Emilia and I walked together to The Morning Bloom, a new beloved mother-daughter owned coffee shop down the street from the program where Emilia worked in downtown Glasford. She excitedly pointed out a yellow DreamBig mentor recruitment flyer pinned to the bulletin. In this dimly lit cafe, we sat by a street-facing window, where the sound of a clinking dishware and music wafted around us in a way that offered us unanticipated privacy. Here, Emilia spoke more freely about what she saw as ongoing challenges for herself and for DreamBig.

Emilia felt that she was committed to being a better youth worker, that she wanted to learn more about youth development, further her racial and cultural awareness, and hire a more diverse and representative direct service staff that reflected the ways in which Glasford had changed over the past decade. Emilia was keenly aware of the new waves of newcomer immigrants, refugees, and youth of color whose families had been pushed out from cities like Eliot and Adin. As a White youth worker, Emilia felt that she needed to learn more about the current issues facing the diversity of girls in the program:

I grew up in the 60's and 70's...that's when, I think, things were really heating up and then they quieted down for a while. But, it's heating up again. You think you

know just because you work with girls for color you think, "Oh yeah, I get it."

You don't. I'll never be able to understand really where they're coming from. I try to read books and try to educate myself on it, but really I want to learn more about that so I can support them better. Their experiences must be so different. That's been, especially with the election and the campaign year, some girls are worried about being deported, some girls are worrying about being targets of violence. I need to deepen my understanding about that.

Youth workers are oftentimes polymaths, with expansive experiential and academic knowledge about young people, their cities, and a variety of content areas such as technology, art, music, sports and science; in spite of this, persisters often shared what they still wanted to learn on the job. Emilia never really emphasized her expertise or practice wisdom gained from thirty years of experience in the field. Rather, she typically emphasized her concern about what she didn't know and her willingness to learn more. "I don't feel like I have it all figured out, by any stretch of the imagination," she asserted. Emilia's determination to keep learning speaks to the ways in which persisters seek to constantly update and inform their understandings of their social identities as informed by contemporary life.

Emilia's pressing preoccupation was how she, as a middle manager, could better retain the staff of color that she believed her girls deserved. Her community calling, focused on equity for girls, was also now expanding to include the issues of affordability for her staff. While she was in charge of hiring and supervision meetings, she felt limited in the financial incentives she could provide to ensure direct-service staff continuity. Her assessment was that most part-time youth workers wanted to stay at DreamBig, but there

were also times in which she could tell that youth work was not the right long-term fit for some of her staff. Now that she was engaging with the financials as a program director, and was working to write grants to support staff salaries, Emilia noticed a pattern. White, middle class youth workers were able to afford to stay working at DreamBig longer:

I met a number of AmeriCorps members, and ideally you want to hire, like we talked about before, people of color that reflect the backgrounds of the girls we're serving. But...[i]n order to be an AmeriCorps member, you have to be able to *afford* to be an AmeriCorps member because it's a volunteer position. You get a very small stipend. You can't really live on your own. It's hard, so you end up having people who come from more affluent families who, or the families can support them, can pay for their apartments or whatever. It seems like *something's wrong* there. The people that we want that have the skills and the knowledge just can't afford to do it.

Emilia wrestled with the reality of DreamBig's model for entry-level youth workers. Her current strategy was to promote youth workers of color to management positions. However, this also meant taking employees, like one of her staff, Thien, away from the everyday activity and face time from youth.

At this point, I felt like we had come full circle in our conversation. For Emilia, working with youth had been both a deeply satisfying work choice and also a never-ending learning project that she found intellectually complex and engaging. Although Emilia found a way to persist, her ongoing question, one that we share, remained: How do we lift barriers to both entry and persistence so that passionate youth workers from all socio-economic backgrounds can stay in the field?

Extrinsic supports, while crucial to reinforcing youth workers' belonging, learning, and value, also revealed the system of inequity in which youth work persistence operates and perpetuates. Whereas field-level funding and organizational resources could work to level opportunities for anyone interested in this career, potentially mitigating the need for independent coping strategies, it was ultimately a reliance on family resources that allowed youth workers from middle-class or dual-income families in my sample to persist, in contrast to many youth workers of color and single, low-income White youth workers to question, transition, or fully exit. Emilia's concerns expose the limitations of current extrinsic supports in creating equity in persistence in youth organizations.

Indeed, most of the youth workers I interviewed were in their late twenties and thirties and had already engaged in a variety of coping strategies to persist. It was perhaps not surprising then that youth workers expressed that they were at or near a "career crossroads," uncertain of their next steps and already burned out from the boundaryless nature of the work. For example, my entry into interviewing Xiomara coincided with her decision to leave Lift Our Voices Eliot (LOVE), the organization she created. She decided to step down from her role as artistic director, moving from Eliot to live with her long distance partner and to figure out her next steps. Over her twelve years as a youth worker, and in her creation of a youth poetry program, she thought deeply about her journey as a youth worker and organizer from youth to adulthood, her survival from personal trauma, the impact of all-consuming profession, and what it meant to move from a state of "survive" to "thrive" in her career. Leaving this organization, and taking a break from full-time youth work, has been an emotional exit but one that she believed was necessary for her health and wellbeing. Even in her final days, Xiomara expressed both

nostalgia and a sense of relief to be transitioning out of this job, evoking both feelings of “loss” and “liberation” that are often associated with significant exits and departures (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2012).

Persisters who were situated in highly sought-after program director positions reflected on how their persistence meant fewer opportunities for younger youth workers to continue in community-based work. Many believed they had benefited from a leadership pipeline in youth work, and they sought to replicate this by eventually exiting or advancing out of their positions. Josué discussed this youth leadership pipeline model with me. With this in mind, he was unsure how much longer he would continue as a program director in Adin’s City Youth Programs. He shared:

I feel like most youth workers always have an exit plan, or exit strategy, or a door that they're just waiting to get close enough to that they can just walk through it. Sometimes it's outside of youth work, and sometimes hopefully it's for more leadership opportunity, but it's not a field that ... and I tell my staff here, "You're not doing this forever. You're either taking my job, or you're doing this until you get the experience and credentials you need to go find and pursue what you need to do." Hopefully it's within youth work, but it's not currently structured as something that people do for their life.

Josué shared here the structural necessity of maintaining a boundaryless identity in youth work. Structurally, he didn’t see the possibilities of “forever” in a youth work position. On the weekends, Josué works as a part-time referee and has been building relationships with his networks in Adin and Eliot to figure out potential career moves into professional refereeing or public administration. He believed that he would carry his youth worker

identity with him in these roles, and, in particular, the values and principles of centering youth voice.

Other “persisters” are beyond the crossroads moment, already making the move out of youth work, sometimes to related fields like classroom teaching and educational technology. Pablo has decided to leave CityVisions, a part-time, hourly position that he has had for five years, to become a full time art teacher at the high school he once attended. “When it was just my son, his mother, and myself, it was okay. Plus, she was working. Now she's going back to school, and I have my daughter now, so it's a little tight...it got really tight.” While CityVisions directors hoped to keep Pablo on with the promise of an eventual full-time position in the next few years, neither Pablo nor his family could wait any longer for this door to open. Also, becoming a high school art teacher in his own high school continued the place-based, reflective, and corrective callings he had in youth work. While Pablo shared that he would not be able to completely carry his youth worker identity with him as a classroom teacher, he felt that his insights and approaches to connecting with young people would still be invaluable in the classroom context. Therefore, while he felt a sense of loss in leaving CityVisions, his boundaryless construction of youth work allowed him to also see possibility in this transition. Similarly, both Ollie and Carlos conveyed their interest in working at a new alternative high school in Winterton. This school, focused on project-based learning, would still offer them the creativity and agency afforded by youth work, while also potentially providing a better salary and benefits.

Many persisters shared their frustrations about the complacency among nonprofit leadership around organizational turnover and exits. For youth workers who did not have

extrinsic supports or coping strategies that could make up the financial difference, there was very little that an individual could do to persist. Rika, who had just finished her master's degree in education and was moving to California, pointed to a "generational difference" in how young versus veteran youth workers understood their turnover dilemma:

Sometimes there's this acceptance, by people in upper level management positions at nonprofits, that their staff will leave. That it is a two, three-year situation and then you move on from there, like being a consultant or something. Do you know what I mean? People are gonna go, get what they need, and then move on to something else. And I think that acceptance [by older staff] may be cause for less of an investment [by management] in staff, and that leads to staff therefore then being less invested.

Having grown up in low-income housing in Adin, Rika felt resolute to feel a sense of financial security and stability after investing time and money in a graduate program. She was seeking work in California, hoping to bridge her degree in education and technology and her ten years of experiences as a youth worker into this next chapter.

Even when older persisters, like Emilia, tried to address the problems in the system by promoting youth workers to program management positions, sustaining and funding long-term direct work with youth remained a puzzle. In interviewing Rose, a 53 year old White youth worker at Wheatley OurHouse, I learned about ongoing conversations that she was having with her supervisors and the board about the program assistant position that she directly supervises. Based on her account, it seemed that Rose and the organization had ultimately accepted turnover at the program assistant level:

...[T]here's been a lot of turnover in that position because it doesn't pay well for a young person, especially if they're going to go on and start a family. So in the 10 years that I've been here, there's been ... I think Josh is the fifth. Kelly, Vincent, Lola, Richard, Josh. So mainly people are here two years. [Josh is] doing a great job. So it's tough. At first I was always like, "Oh, my god." Now I came to understand that ...or I came to *accept* it that that's what the position is, but it's also tough for the kids [in the program].

This seems to be the kind of acceptance and complacency that Rika worried about at Eliot OurHouse. Youth workers like Rose and Josué had the more “coveted” youth work positions but could see the revolving door of the youth leaders whom they supervised. Younger youth workers were the ones whom young people often formed attachments to and expected to see over the course of their adolescence. While Rose had raised this issue of turnover with organizational directors and board members, she also felt that everyone in the organization had depressed salaries that did not capture their hours on the job. This made it difficult to singularly address program assistant pay without addressing the salaries and boundaryless culture that everyone engaged in at Wheatley OurHouse.

Conclusion: The Tenuous Link between Identity and Persistence

Persisters, in particular organizational lifers, shared a wide range of extrinsic supports that strengthened their occupational identities and attachment to the field. These external dimensions of support —professional, organizational, and interpersonal —seemed to spark and be in conversation with persisters’ community callings. These supports provided a sense of belonging in shared purpose, enabled learning aligned to their community-based and youth-centered interests, and conferred value to their care and

help oriented work. Persisters specifically shared the importance of organizational supports, such as curriculum and scripts, engaged supervision, and tailored learning opportunities, which offered them springboards for creativity and agency in their work with young people. Persisters' experiences with current extrinsic supports show us the ways in which career mentors, professional networks, and organizational resources can foster positive occupational identities in youth work. Organizational and familial supports, including moral and financial help, mitigated the individual coping strategies employed by some persisters. Verbal and written affirmations — from youth and their families — fortified youth workers' community callings, reminding them that their work was of value, neither a hobby nor a luxury, but rather, a necessity for young people and their families.

Interestingly, even when persisters appeared to have several extrinsic supports for identity development and persistence, this did not seem to fully change their boundaryless role constructions. In particular, in analyzing the responses of organizational lifers, boundless time on the job and multiple “hats” (in the words of Sam) seemed to remain consistent features of identity construction. This speaks to the ways in which the boundaryless identity is connected to a broader culture in youth work. The primary way in which organizational lifers appeared to differ from other persisters was in how they followed a more traditional advancement model within one organization, moving away from direct-service work and into program supervision and management over the course of several years.

Exploration of extrinsic supports also revealed the ways in which persisters still relied on informal (as opposed to institutional) supports — partner income and benefits,

“special families” (to quote Rose), and youth affirmations — to persist. Additionally, while professional opportunities cultivated a sense of belonging and learning that were critical to strengthening youth workers’ sense of occupational identity, persisters from low-income and single-income families still struggled to make sense of long-term commitments without material and financial resources. Therefore, having a strong attachment to a youth worker identity did not necessarily make it materially easier to navigate long-term commitments. Some organizational supports, particularly focused on alleviating pressures around benefits and childcare, seemed to make the difference.

As exemplified by Emilia’s current hiring dilemma, older persisters felt constrained in how to retain low-income youth workers of color by the ways in which philanthropic and grant-based money were distributed. To support the persistence of younger youth workers of color, Emilia aimed to advance them to program manager roles. Traditional models of career advancement become the mechanism for career persistence in youth work. However, this strategy ultimately reinforced the hierarchy between youth-facing work and adult-oriented management. By considering the experiences of youth workers in transition and at a career crossroads, I further interrogated the current model of persistence.

Findings from this chapter, therefore, also expose the tenuous relationship between occupational identity and persistence. This weak relationship was most pronounced when persisters shared that extrinsic supports did not explicitly address the financial and social challenges that they faced (e.g. rent inflation, college debt, seeking affordable childcare). I suggest that current institutional supports in youth organizations are inadequate, even for persisters who have continued in one organization, in the face of

structural precarity and inequality. The organizations that participants described still seemed to rely on persisters with community callings, who employed individual coping strategies and had extrinsic financial support (e.g. dual-income households). In the following chapter, I review my overall claims and consider research, policy, and practice implications for the field.

Chapter 7: Addressing Precarious Persistence: Implications and Recommendations

In this final chapter, I review key findings and claims from each empirical chapter. I discuss persisters' current identity constructions (community callings and boundaryless careers), the extrinsic barriers that initiate individual coping strategies, and extrinsic supports that cultivate belonging, learning, and value. Returning to the theoretical literature on occupations and work precarity, I reconsider relationship between identity and persistence. I then share the implications of this research study, reflecting on what questions are still unanswered, and conclude with recommendations for future research, policy, and practice, drawing on the suggestions of youth workers.

Overview of Empirical and Theoretical Claims

In this study, I argued that intrinsic motivations for youth work inspired persisters to stay in the field, even when these people entered the field based on different motivations. Persisters in this sample treated their work not as jobs but rather as community callings (see Duffy & Dik, 2009). They were driven by personal passion and community purpose in the work. These callings were social-justice oriented, reflective and corrective, place-based, and spiritually driven. Second, I argue that these community callings shaped a boundaryless identity and culture for persisters. Youth workers took on several roles to do the most responsive work on behalf of young people. These practitioners shared a sense of boundaryless identity and culture across time on the job, responsibility around family and community engagement, and maintenance of co-existing occupational identities (e.g. art and youth work). Boundaryless constructions were both philosophical and practical. For example, research participants refuted traditional lines of personal and professional life, understandings of youth in isolation of their families, and

singular disciplinary knowledge that could inform this field. They disliked thinking of their multiple identities in a hierarchical format. Some persisters eventually negotiated boundaries around time, recognizing the importance of having a distinct personal life to unplug and recharge. This renegotiation helped to prevent feelings of emotional burnout (Maslach, 2003). Pragmatically, a boundaryless construction of identity allowed persisters to envision their work in different context and fields. It afforded these people the flexibility to make a necessary job exit or a transition out of youth work while still carrying a consistent occupational identity with them. Therefore, boundarylessness was conveyed as both identity and strategy, offering both flexibility and expansiveness.

Third, in the name of community callings, persisters engaged in a variety of individual coping strategies to navigate ongoing field precarity and job insecurity. The navigation of barriers at the societal, organizational, occupational, and interpersonal level revealed how persisting came at personal costs and concessions, particularly for youth workers without financial support from their families. Persisters confronted several extrinsic factors that jeopardized occupational identity development formation in the early years. Gentrification and student loan debt made already low salaries and youth work wages close to unlivable. These factors seemed to have the most immediate impact on single youth workers and first generation college students. Persisters coped by taking on multiple jobs to pay the bills and support their families. Disconnected organizations and managers devalued and marginalized youth program staff, both relying on these persisters' callings while also stripping them of agency. Centering their community callings as a boundaryless career, youth workers felt it necessary to ultimately get out of toxic work environments and move on to other jobs. Surprisingly, persisters shared

stories of several toxic jobs that were in both community-based organizations and standalone youth programs. Persisters also shared that the boundaryless culture of youth work was, ultimately, unsustainable. Responsive care was a challenge to some who felt overwhelmed by the nonstop pace and hours on the job. Therefore, youth workers employed self care rituals and began to draw firmer lines between professional and personal life. Finally, while families could be supportive, many put pressure on these youth workers to leave their jobs in search of more lucrative work. In response to both burnout and family pressures (both financial and status related), persisters advanced to director and manager roles as a way to continue in the field. Because many of these persisters saw youth work as their calling, they employed coping strategies as buffers from the challenges posed along the way.

Fourth, I argue that extrinsic supports provided critical opportunities for youth workers to develop a sense of belonging, learning, and worth, but these supports also exposed the fragile link between occupational identity and persistence when financial compensation was inadequate. These supports demonstrated the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in shaping occupational identity (Skorikov, 2008). Extrinsic supports were exemplified by the experiences of organizational lifers, who were able to clearly trace their growth and advancement through professional and organizational supports. However, I argue that even organizational lifers' persistence was precarious, dependent on community callings and family supports (such as partner benefits). Younger "lifers" (who had already spent ten years in one organization) were unsure about how much longer they should stay in one organization. Extrinsic supports primarily included moral affirmation from youth and communities as well as financial

and material support from families. Some youth workers also described the importance of career mentors and professional networks. These findings about extrinsic supports raised questions regarding the reliance of nonprofit organizations on dual-income persisters (with boundaryless identities) who are called to the work. Persisters illuminated the current reliance of organizations on youth workers' identities as callings.

In this final occupational identity configuration, shared in Figure 8, I illustrate the interplay of external influences with one another, as well as how they can serve to either protect and nourish persistence or deplete and undermine it. Most persisters had clear intrinsic motivations, as captured by community callings, as well as some access to extrinsic supports that imbued a sense of belonging, learning, and value to their work. However, I suggest that when callings and individual coping strategies were the only things ensuring persistence, the relationship between identity and persistence seemed to be exploitative (Anteby et al., 2016). As seen in the previous chapter, persisters were sharing their plans of leaving both organizations and the field altogether. Based on youth workers' narrations of persistence, it seemed like regardless of opportunities for organizational learning and growth, extrinsic societal, organizational, and interpersonal barriers hindered and shaped the nature of persistence and exits. I argue that this reliance on intrinsic motivations rather than extrinsic supports will ultimately gentrify this workforce in ways that can also shape the very nature of the youth work as well.

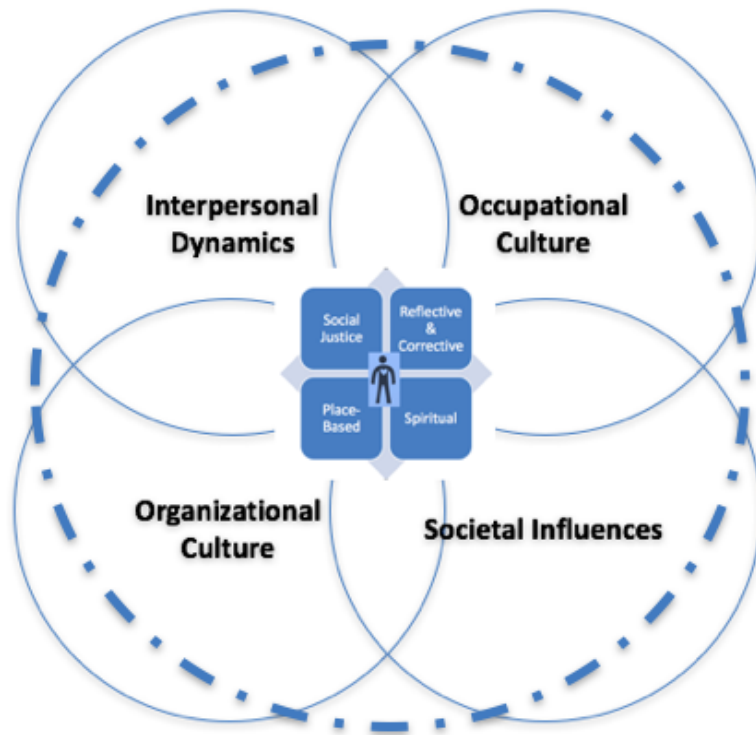


Figure 8. Extrinsic Influences on Community Callings and Boundaryless Identities

Study Implications and Recommendation

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

Findings from this small sample study offer an important window into education and care labor that is typically overlooked in the research. Only recently has research on youth work linked macro contemporary pressures to the everyday experiences of youth workers (see Baldrige, 2014; 2018; 2019, Fusco et al., 2013). This study furthers inquiry linking macro and micro occupational study by considering both the internal and social factors that shape identity and persistence for youth workers. Second, this macro-micro link has implications for inquiry into gentrification, place, and education. Youth workers

shared their personal and community attachments, as well as concerns about displacement and affordability that might affect community-based programs and schools alike. Finally, this research has implications for future theory building about occupational identities. It is important to understand the fragile relationship between identity and persistence in youth work and its implications. Persisters experienced marginalization related to labor, gender, race, and age. Understanding how these identities intersect, layer, and interact with one another would be an important form of inquiry across educational and care contexts.

Considerations for Future Research

Within this research study, there are several possibilities for further analysis of these life-story interviews. For example, given that so many of my participants identified as first generation and second generation immigrants, I was curious about their notions of identity and place as related to their sense of community calling. Additionally, many of the youth workers talked about their work with immigrant and undocumented immigrant youth, which uncovered the unique ways that youth workers are positioned to support and advocate for youth within marginalized communities. Second, given the gender identity split in my sample, there are ways in which a gender analysis could be conducted on the pressures and expectations across genders in youth work, building on the research about resisting hero and savior narratives (Baldrige, 2018). Ideally, I would like to conduct follow up interviews with my sample of persisters. It has been over a year since the interviews, and I have learned about some of their job and career changes through informal communications. Following youth workers over the long term can illuminate these movements and decision points in a different way.

Outside of this study, there are several questions that can further understanding of identity and culture in youth work. There are youth workers who are also classroom teachers and afterschool care professionals. Many classroom teachers continue working in the evenings as school-age care providers in programs such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Interviewing youth workers who are also teachers could shed some interesting light on different kinds of youth work identity construction in the field. I could also identify a group of individuals who believed they have fully exited from the profession to better understand the boundaryless construction from their vantage point. I also see value in future research being more collaborative and action-research oriented, prioritizing the questions and ideas of youth workers in the design and data collection phase. This can ensure that research helps answer youth workers' questions as well.

Finally, national demographic data collection on a range of topics like salaries, job changes, and socioeconomic status is critical in situating these persisters' narratives within a broader population study. Conducting these survey studies every few years can help to track youth workers over the life course. Given that my research was conducted in the Northeast, I often interviewed highly educated youth workers who grew up in a culture in which work (and the prestige associated it) was extremely salient. I do think that place matters, especially in terms of culture, but also in terms of the rent inflation, gentrification, and population density. Expanding the sampling to contexts like the South (e.g. North Carolina or Georgia) or West (e.g. California) would further illuminate whether this is a local or national phenomena.

Theoretically, I suggest that this study can inform occupational studies in care and education. Through my conceptual framework, I bridged sociological and psychological research on occupations. This bridging can be further interrogated and deepened to understand social identities in work. In particular, this study could, in combination with other empirical work on school teachers and early childhood, facilitate the development of a critical education labor studies framework.

Policy and Practice Implications

Findings from this study have implications for policymakers, philanthropists, and organizational leaders, who may be complicit in the undervaluation and gentrification of this workforce. My sample of persisters centered their callings, or intrinsic motivations, as a means to persist. They employed individual coping strategies, such as holding multiple jobs, to navigate the precarity of this work. Extrinsic supports revealed the ways in which organizations still relied on youth workers who could afford to do the work. This oftentimes excluded youth workers from low-income households and those who had dependent family members from persisting in the field.

Persisters shared that direct-service roles are currently designed for turnover and exits. If youth workers stay in direct-service roles, it is mainly driven by intrinsic motivations. This set-up suggests that youth work is devalued even within youth-serving organizations. Turnovers and exits will continue to naturally recur unless organizations address issues related to in-house supervision, training, and pay. Youth workers alluded to larger nonprofit organizations having strikingly unequal pay — these inequalities perpetuate the devaluation of youth and care work, which constructs youth work as a luxury or charity item rather than a public necessity. Given these issues, how might

policymakers, funders, and organizational leaders address issues in workforce representation?

At the practice level, youth workers' reliance on their community callings and individual coping strategies fostered a culture of martyrdom in the workplace that sometimes led to feelings of guilt. The boundaryless approach, while exemplifying the devotion of persisters, could also lead to resentment, fatigue, and detachment, signs of burnout (Maslach, 2003). I heard these sentiments of frustration among multiple persisters. While this frustration was often directed toward supervisors and management or to the broader systems, I wondered about the impact of this unhappiness on their youth participants.

In reviewing key findings across this study, it is important to note that youth workers traversed many different types of organizations. These diverse organizational settings had very different orientations to the value and centrality of youth work. Additionally, they were funded very differently from one another. The various contexts and settings in which youth work occurs can be a challenge when considering implications and policy recommendations. However, because there are national and local youth work organizations and forums, I share some ideas here, as informed by the voices of persisters in my study.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

Grantmakers and Philanthropists: Fund Salaries and Mid-Career Youth Workers

Almost twenty years ago, Milbrey McLaughlin (2000) posed a recommendation that still seems relevant today. In discussing community-based programs, she asserted that the field should fund people rather than programs. In current funding paradigm, new

programs and activities are funded by grants. Philanthropists, small donors, and companies typically supply material resources to programs, such as new computers, or volunteers. Oftentimes, salaries are a line item within grant-funded programs. How can we support persistence if this is not considered a funding priority? Based on my findings, I suggest that we cautiously revisit McLaughlin's suggestion about funding people as opposed to programs.

Persisters who were at a crossroads wanted to stay and grow in their work while also advancing their degrees. Some youth workers experienced an infusion of support for their youth worker identity through graduate school programs or specific trainings. For youth workers who had already been in the field for ten years in their early thirties, "mid-career" investment could start as early as right then. As put simply by Rika:

I think if there was more investment in youth work staff, I think financially having that be a feasible job, I think people would stay in it. I think burnout is true, but I think burnout is exacerbated when you financially can't think about it ... Especially student loans, people have all these BS student loans for no reason. And they have that after 10 years you get the [loan forgiveness]. But it just doesn't...it's not sustainable.

Some persisters were wary of funding people vs. programs. For example, Xiomara, worried about the cult of personality and celebrity that can take over youth programs. Based on her argument, philanthropists already fund programs that have this celebrity.

However, given that persisters from diverse class backgrounds participated in one-year fellowships like Americorps, it is possible that mid-career funding could also inspire longer tenures in direct-service work across backgrounds as well. Mid-career

funding can also help to reinforce professional identity in the work. It can protect youth workers from burnout and extrinsic negativity about their work. Given my findings about the need for livable salaries and benefits, funding for salaries and benefits *must* precede investments in professional development. Derrick made his pitch to the funders he hoped to speak to about funding:

We can save money. You can save lives on the front end. That's the hardest thing about our work. You don't know the true product because you don't know how many narratives you actually change. There's no way to measure all the stories that you change. The people who don't go to jail, the people who did go to college, the people who graduated high school, the people who didn't get pregnant. All of these things, they're intangible. You can't measure them unless you have everyone come back and everyone does a survey. I think the biggest pitch, since we're talking about money, I want them to know that they'll save money by doing this. You've got to invest money. Your tax dollars end up paying for a lot of this stuff anyway.

Derrick's suggestions speak to the invisible dollars saved in prevention-based and harm reduction focused work. This did not seem to be current logics of funding for youth work. It often seemed as if philanthropic dollars were going into building upgrades and renovations as well as programmatic grants as opposed to salaries. Rose, Emilia, and Christina were working in recently renovated buildings or ones under construction. While these facilities are an important signal of safety and care for young people, I suggest that youth work positions can also be endowed with philanthropic funding in the same way, thus ensuring that youth workers can afford to stay in these positions. By funding mid-

career youth workers, programs will gain invaluable expertise that is often lost in typical turnover and exits. Youth will have the experience of long-term mentorship, which makes youth programs particularly valuable in their educational and developmental trajectories.

Policymakers and Universities: Restructure Loan Forgiveness for Public Workers

Currently, the federal public service loan forgiveness policy requires 120 monthly payments with an employer. However, this assumes that public service employment affords stability in order to make these consecutive payments. While advocating for changes to public policy may be a long term recommendation, local universities and partnerships can help youth workers envision a way of completing their degrees and making longer commitments to youth work that are not reliant on a forgiveness plan that overlooks the precariousness of public service employment. Persisters discussed their ability to complete discounted degrees through Americorp fellowship partnerships with local universities that were attentive to the financial burden of higher education paired with public service work.

Youth Workers: Reframe Professionalization to Issues of Equity and Rights

This study also informs the debates about how and whether to professionalize youth work through further degree and licensure requirements. Many youth workers craved educational opportunities and forms of feedback to improve their work. This speaks to internal professional accountability that is necessary for good work. Persisters enjoyed program evaluations that helped to inform their practice. However additional certification and credentialing seemed misaligned with how youth workers constructed their identity in the field. Some persisters in my sample saw youth work as part of their second chance. After high school arrests, youth workers worried about what kind of

employment they would be able to seek. Licensure models should not be created to exclude youth workers whose work is framed around identity-based, reflective, and corrective work. If increased credentialing and higher education were to be required, these decisions must be attentive to the rapid gentrification and student loan debt that is making youth work a less viable long-term option for young people.

Adding specific or additional youth studies certification may be a high price for prospective youth workers who have already invested in college degrees. Youth workers come from very different educational backgrounds, which were all utilized in their work (e.g. education, social work, public health, etc). Additionally, standardization across all youth worker practices may be exceedingly difficult to capture, although the key aspect across all contexts are the relational aspects of working with youth. Genevieve proposed how a youth work pipeline could offer a gradual career growth that honors and centers people from the community:

Your best experts in doing this work are the people from that community because they just have so much knowledge. They are the young person there and especially if they want to be at that center. A person who went through the center, has gone up the ranks in terms of being a young person in that program, it's kind of like the last little trophy that you get or something. They give kids trophies for everything. You get trophies for the sports team if your team even lost, just for participating. This would be a meaningful trophy, where "I did this program, I was here for 10 years or from 3rd grade to 8th grade and I came back in high school. Now they call me a peer leader." You get those nuggets that get you stepping up a ladder. And then, now, you're a youth worker. From a youth worker

you want to be a director, but how are they really honing in on those skills? What are the skillsets that you need [to then be a program director] and how are they supporting it in offering those skills to you?

As Genevieve suggested, community career ladders or lattices can honor different kinds of expertise, acknowledge both degrees and community knowledge, and support local cohorts to be part of community change. Youth leadership can be a viable entry, but only with scaffolding, support, and financial advancement along the way.

Professionalization efforts, as they stand, focus more on holding youth workers accountable to standards of quality and fixed notions of education and care. While this may help with creating some uniform understanding of expectations, and youth workers appreciated feedback on their work, it is not clear from my findings that these efforts are valuable in encouraging persistence. Persisters' discussions of transitioning out of youth work demonstrate interesting possibilities for how these callings and identities are being carried into other kinds of work as well. The diversity of youth work philosophies suggests that any kind of "standards" would need to be decided within community and with youth as opposed to by external management entities.

Rather than professionalization, I suggest that the field needs to reframe around issues of equity and rights as a way to approach the dilemma of persistence. With equity and rights mindsets, youth workers could organize for better wages and working conditions. Youth worker networking meetings could be local settings for figuring out a way to collectivize and protect worker rights and increase pay. Advocacy efforts might encourage states, cities, and local institutions to better support youth workers' rights as employees and to look beyond the current focus of building professional standards.

By focusing on equity and rights, youth workers can consider what advancement and mobility looks like in this field. Persisters who worked for larger city and community-based agencies shared that they were being managed and supervised by people who knew nothing about youth development or youth work or issues of gentrification and racism affecting youth communities. The disconnect and marginalization of youth services within larger agencies affected youth worker morale and was confusing for those most dedicated to the work. Therefore, just like programs are assessed for the wellbeing of youth participants, organizations should be assessed on the wellbeing of youth workers they employ. Persisters rarely talked about leaving a job because of young people. Rather, they left because they did not feel equipped for the work, or there were disagreements among adults about what was best for the programs.

When I asked youth workers about their recommendations to policymakers and funders, only one person, Derrick explicitly brought up unionizing youth workers. It is possible that others did not bring up unionization because of the resistance on landing on one identity or approach to youth work. I think that collective organizing is possible with the appropriate professional allies. This may mean partnering with similar occupations whether in the care sector, early childcare workers, or teachers to fight for basic benefits such as a paid time off and health care. Ultimately, community accountability versus professional accountability may address the current inequalities in persistence in youth work.

Organizational Leaders: Center Care and Consider Boundaries

Persisters in this study engaged with and reenacted boundaryless identities in the workplace. Even if overtime pay or formalized benefits are not affordable for programs,

organizational leaders can do more to make their programs more equitable and care-oriented for the adults who work there. As Josué advised to his youth leaders, setting boundaries to restore and recharge is essential for good work to happen. Many persisters shared their evolving self-care practices that they believed made them happier and better youth workers for their adolescent participants. Some of these self-care practices took years to cultivate, and persisters tried to impart this wisdom on entry-level youth workers, both in their own work and during interviews. Youth workers should have systems in which they discuss the value of personal boundaries with their supervisors and their youth. This could benefit the overall morale within the organization, individual practices, as well as youth participants' wellbeing.

Given many participants' comments after our interviews that the process of sharing was therapeutic and empowering, I wondered how youth workers might benefit from clinical therapy or other forums in which they could deal with both vicarious trauma while also feeling like their expertise was valued. Therefore, other ways leaders can enact organizational care can be to build partnerships with universities to offer individual or group therapy for youth workers experiencing vicarious trauma from the job or access to free seminars and classes.

Concluding Thoughts

The Roman poet Juvenal once penned the phrase: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Which translates to: Who watches the watchmen? Similarly, I ask: who cares for those who care for youth? Everyone claims to want the best for children and youth, but we often erase youth work in research, policy, and practice. Politicians and philanthropists champion out-of-school time programs and commend youth workers for their

contributions to the safety or cultural wealth of a city. In the news, community-based youth workers are portrayed as enigmatic heroes, sacrificing everything to help others. Yet it is clear that no amount of feel-good stories will translate into systemic changes and improvements for the working conditions of youth workers. In the public eye, youth workers are one-dimensional — saviors, bureaucrats, or babysitters — valorized or stigmatized in the process.

The youth workers' narratives from this study defy these tropes; they have a range of motivations, knowledge, and skill sets that they draw on to do the work. Their persistence is also fraught with challenges that often lead to job insecurity; there is a troubling irony in the fact that these practitioners face some of the same challenges that they wish to eradicate for their youth. This dissertation sought to deepen and complicate current conceptions of identity and persistence in youth work. I examined the complexities of persisters' life stories, which highlighted tensions between their callings and the realities of this career path. These youth workers, generous with their time and thinking, conveyed both strength in their convictions in this work and fragility in the ways in which they navigated it. While I share these implications and recommendations as possible paths forward, I recognize that some of the answers to resolving the precarious nature of youth work persistence rest outside the field as well. However, when addressing issues within this occupation, we must center the voices of youth workers. It must be a collective endeavor, a radical act of care with and for youth workers as well as the communities they hold together.

Appendix A: Research Participants' Organizations & Activities

Table 1b. Current Organizational Affiliations & Activities (n=20)

<i>Name</i>	Current Organizational Affiliation* (acronyms) (city)	Youth Organization Affiliation	Primary Activity
<i>Nicole</i>	Adin Service Learning Association (ASLA)	University Program	Service Learning
<i>Ernesto</i>	Future Ready in Adin (FRIA)	Housing Authority	Colleg Prep & Life Skills
<i>Genevieve</i>			
<i>Josué</i>	Adin City Youth Programs (CYP)	City Sponsored	"Garden-Variety" Program
<i>Christina</i>	OurHouse (Catherine)	National Network	"Garden-Variety" Program
<i>Rika*</i>	OurHouse (Eliot) (part-time)		
<i>Rose*</i>	OurHouse (Wheatley)		
<i>Claire</i>	Centro de Bellas Artes (Eliot)	Community Development Corporation	Arts and Work Readiness
<i>Pablo</i>	CityVisions (Eliot) (part-time)	Independent Local Nonprofit	Arts and Entrepreneurship
<i>Gerard</i>	CollegeBright (Eliot)	Independent Local Nonprofit	Academic Support
<i>Emilia*</i>	DreamBig (Glasford)	National Network	"Garden-Variety"
<i>Thien</i>			Mentorship & Life Skills
<i>Aminata</i>	Farm4Justice (Glasford)	Regional Network	Farming, Social Change
<i>Sam*</i>			

<i>Xiomara</i>	Lift Our Voices (Eliot) (LOVE)	Independent Local Nonprofit	Arts & Organizing
<i>Carlos</i>	ModernArt Consortium (MAC) Museum	Museum-Based	Arts
<i>Nate</i>	NetPositive (Eliot)	Independent Local Nonprofit	Sports
<i>Ollie</i>	Our Neighborhood Production (ONP) (Winterton)	Community Media Access	Arts & Communication
<i>Omar*</i>	Pontu Cape Verde (Eliot)	Catholic Services	"Garden-Variety"
<i>Derrick*</i>	YouthActNow (Winterton)	Regional Network	Youth Organizing

* “organizational lifers” had spent either all of their youth work years or over ten at one organization

Appendix B: Research Participants' Educational Backgrounds

Table 2c. Educational Backgrounds (n=20)

Name	Associates/Undergraduate Major*	Masters
Ernesto	Physics (Courses in Psychology)	
Aminata	Nursing; Public Health	Nonprofit Management
Nate	Sociology (Minor: Holocaust & Genocide Studies)	
Ollie	Communications	Education
Rika	Economics (Minor: English; Dance)	Education
Christina	Journalism	
Carlos	Music; English; Education; Business; Theater	
Gerard	Political Science	Education
Josué	Human Services (Concentration: Child and Family Studies)	
Xiomara	Arts Education	
Thien	Biology; BioChem; Chemistry; Pharmacy; Psychology	
Genevieve	Social Work	Social Work
Pablo	Fine Arts	
Derrick	Sociology	
Sam	Microbiology; Chemistry	Int'l Public Health & Policy
Nicole	Nursing; Human Services; Youth Development	
Claire	Criminal Justice (Minor: Psychology)	Social Work
Omar	Computer Science; Sociology and Criminology	
Emilia	English	
Rose	Education	Education

* The final declared major is in **bold**

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Hello! My name is Deepa, and I'm currently a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. For my dissertation research, I'm conducting **in-depth interviews with youth workers in the *Eliot* area about their sense of occupational identity and persistence** in this field. I am currently looking to interview people working in *Eliot* and surrounding cities who:

- **Have five or more years of experience in youth work**
- Work with youth ages 12 to 21
- Work in a community based organization, nonprofit, community school, or street outreach
- Spend half or more of their time working directly with youth

Participation in this study would include a **program visit and tour of your program**, as well as **an in-depth interview** that will take approximately 2 to 3 hours. This interview typically occurs **over two meetings** based on your availability. In this interview, I will ask you share your life story, and primarily focus on questions about your journey into youth work—such as key job experiences and influential people who have shaped your career — as well as successes, challenges, and reflections about continuing in this field.

As a former youth worker and professional development facilitator, this research is near and dear to me. Through this research, it is my hope to provide a better picture of youth workers' entry, journeys, and continuity in the field that is often associated with issues with burnout, organizational turnover, and early exits. Through creating a platform for youth workers' voices, I hope this research will inform current funding, policies, resources, and training opportunities in the nonprofit sector.

This research is NOT intended to be an evaluation of your work. Your information will be kept confidential, and any names of people or organizations will be de-identified in this research process to protect your identity.

Upon completion, you will receive a 40 dollar gift card as a thank you for your time.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or know of people who might be a good fit for this research, please contact me:

Deepa Vasudevan
[\[email address\]](#)
 Phone: [xxx-xxx-xxxx]

Please let me know if you have any further questions about this study. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you!

Best,
 Deepa

Appendix D: Consent Form

Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

Purpose of the research: I am seeking to better understand experienced youth workers' sense of occupational identity — their beliefs, values, and attachment to youth work — as well as the supports and challenges to their persistence in this field.

What this research entails for participants: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet and provide a short tour of your youth program along with one in-depth interview. In this interview, you will be asked to answer a few questions about your childhood, school, and extracurricular experiences and answer several questions about your history in the youth work field. In particular, the interviewer will ask questions about your entry into youth work, significant job experiences, influential people (youth and mentors), success and challenges to staying in the field, and reflections on your connection to youth work and related professions.

With your permission, I will audio record this interview. I will not ask you to state your name on the recording.

Duration of research participation: The preliminary meeting and program tour will take 30 to 45 minutes. The interview will take approximately 2 to 3 hours.

Risks: No risks are anticipated, as your individual identity will remain anonymous.

Benefits: While there are no immediate or direct benefits to this research for participants, this is an opportunity for you to share your story about your youth worker journey, including your reflections, opinions, and beliefs about the success and challenges of continuing in this work. It is my hope that this research will help inform current research, policy, and funding supports for long-term youth workers.

Compensation: In appreciation of your time, I will provide a \$30 gift card upon completion of the interview.

Confidentiality: At no time will your actual identity be revealed in this research. I will assign a pseudonym and unique identification number. Your real name will not be used. Anyone who transcribes responses will only know you by this pseudonym. The transcript, without your name, will be kept until the research is complete. I will destroy the recording when the research is complete.

The data that I collect will be kept on a password-protected computer in a locked office. The key code linking your name with your pseudonym will be password-protected, and only members of this research will have access to it. It will be destroyed when the research is complete. I will use pseudonyms and de-identify your information (e.g. organizational affiliation) in any publications or presentations. Please know that given

youth worker networks and communities, it is possible that people may be able to figure out who you are even after the de-identification process.

Participation and withdrawal: Your participation in completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may change your mind at any time and leave the study. Refusal to participate or stopping your participation will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also skip any question during the interview, but continue to participate in the rest of the study.

To Contact the Researcher: If you have questions or concerns, please contact the researcher, Deepa Vasudevan, by email: [email address] or by phone: [xxx-xxx-xxxx]. You may also reach out to the faculty sponsor for this research, Professor Roberto Gonzales. Phone: [xxx-xxx-xxxx], Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138. Email: [email]. Please reach out if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, including:

- If you would like to talk to the researcher
- If you think the research has harmed you, or
- If you wish to withdraw from the study.

Who you can contact about your rights in this research, for questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints that are not being addressed by the researcher, or research-related harm: Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research at Harvard University, 1414 Massachusetts Avenue, Second Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138. Phone: 617-496-2847 (CUHS). Email: cuhs@fas.harvard.edu.

Statement of Consent

I have read the information in this consent form. All my questions about the research have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalty.

Signature

Your signature below indicates your permission to take part in this research. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____

Appendix E: Participant Background Survey

As a participant in Deepa Vasudevan's study, please complete this brief survey. Your information will remain confidential and may inform questions in the interviews.

Thank you!

Name (Please note that your real name will remain private and will not be used in any presentation of this research): _____

Preferred Email: _____

Preferred Phone Number: _____

Pseudonym:

To ensure that your name or anything else that could be used to identify you are kept confidential and private, I will choose a pseudonym for you. You can also suggest your own pseudonym here: _____

Socio-Demographic Information

Gender: _____ Preferred Gender Pronoun: _____

Age: _____ Race/Ethnicity: _____ Country of Birth: _____

City of Current Residence: _____

Educational Background

Your highest level of education (Choose **one** answer):

☐ Some High School ☐ HS Diploma/GED ☐ Some College

☐ Associates Degree ☐ Bachelors Degree ☐ Masters Degree

☐ Doctoral Degree ☐ Other (Specify) _____

Youth Work Background

What is your current job title? _____

What is your current organizational affiliation? _____

Years experience working with youth: _____

With which of the following youth populations do you work? (Choose **all** that apply)

☐ K – 5th Graders ☐ 6th – 8th Graders ☐ 9th – 12th Graders

☐ 18-21 year olds ☐ College Students ☐ Youth who have
dropped out of school

Please list any specific populations of youth that you work with (e.g. immigrant youth, LGBTQIA, special needs, youth experiencing homelessness):

Please share a few available dates or preferred times of day for a program visit (app. 30 minutes to 1 hour) and interviews (approximately 2-3 hours total):

If you have any recommendations for people to be interviewed for this study, please provide names and emails here:

A fairly quiet space is needed for the interview for recording purposes. Where would you prefer to be interviewed?

Appendix F: Interview Guide

This interview protocol includes the main questions that guided participants' to discuss their occupational history, experiences, and identity. Recently, Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno (2016) introduced an analytical framework of "three lenses" on occupational research. In their review of research on occupations and professions, they identified three lines of inquiry that can move away from only studying traditional professionals: "becoming," "doing," and "relating." In a *becoming* lens, researchers look into how people are "inducted" and "socialized" into "shared cultural values, norms, and worldviews" of a job (p. 11). *Becoming* studies include research inquiry into control and inequality within the workplace. A *doing* lens "concerns itself empirically with how people act and how these actions matter" (p. 28), often moving from individualized experiences alone to a collective understanding of role and expertise. A focus on *doing* means examining work practice, the political work of reorganizing responsibility among occupational groups, and considering the emergence of new occupations. The third lens, a line of inquiry focused on *relating*, moves away from competitive interpretations of occupational formation to ones in which roles are understood as complementary. Anteby, et al., (2016) note: "A relating lens focuses attention on understanding when and how occupational groups collaborate with other groups to perform interdependent work or collectively expand their social influence" (p. 46). These lenses capture the substance of work culture and identity and offered a helpful analytic for my interview questions about occupational identity formation and persistence across the life course.

To further guide this conversation, I utilized a timeline tool (Adriansen, 2012), in which I provide a large piece of paper, colorful pens, and 2 lines, the top one for work history and bottom line for significant personal events, that will divide the paper into three sections. While there is a value in the sequential telling of a work journey, I was attentive to the interests of the interviewer as well as discontinuities in these narratives (Bruner, 1991; Bateson, 1989). This meant that I invited participants to share their feelings about particular work episodes or return to and "skip" between events in their description of their work history. The timeline facilitated this movement across stories, and will serve as a visual "'collective memory' where the story can be seen both by the interviewer and the interviewee" (Adriansen, p. 48). This timeline was treated similarly to field notes, and are not displayed here, as it may compromise anonymity. Rather, it is a tool to prompt events, memories, and reflection.

Main Topic	Script and Questions
A. Personal Background	[After touring current program together, we will find a quiet space within the program where the participant will review the consent form. I explain the use of the audio recorder and the timeline to encourage further conversation about particular memories and events] As you already know, this is an interview to better understand experienced youth workers' identities and persistence in this work. I will be asking you to share your work journey, your entry and experiences of this work, support, challenges, and important memories. If any questions make you uncomfortable, you can ask to skip that question. Do you have any final questions before we get started? To begin this interview, I'm going to ask you a few questions about your background. Instructions: Please blue pen on this first line here to indicate any significant personal events that we discuss. [These marker instructions were ultimately eliminated from these interviews] 1. Can you tell me about your current job? What does a day in the life of ____ look like right now? 2. Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood and your family? 3. Where did you grow up? 4. Do you remember what school was like for you growing up? 5. Did you participate in any out-of-school time programs or school based extracurriculars? a. Can you share your experience from these activities? 6. Can you tell me about any degrees, certificates, or professional licenses that you currently hold? When did you receive them? Instructions: Use the blue pen on the personal timeline to indicate when you received these degrees on this line. 7. Are these degrees related to education and youth development?

B. Occupational Identity: Becoming a Youth Worker	I'm going to ask you to recall your first job in education and youth work. [Instructions: Can you indicate on this work history line with the green pen what year you started in youth work?]: 1. Where were you working? 2. Can you tell me about what this job position entailed? 3. How did you learn about the position? 4. Did anyone inspire or influence you to take this job? 5. Were you leaving another job or type of work at the time? Can you tell me about this transition? [Instructions: use this purple pen on the work history timeline to share general dates of jobs prior to youth work] 6. Can you describe the young people that you worked with in this role? What do you remember most about them? 7. What felt like the most important aspects of your work at the time? 8. Did you feel prepared? a. If yes, can you tell me about what this preparation looked like? If no, what knowledge or skills did you need at the time? 9. Who helped you on site when you didn't know what to do? 10. Can you tell me about a memorable experience from working in this role? 11. How did this job experience influence your interest in this kind of work? 12. Do you remember any particular challenges? 13. Were you working additional jobs at this time? 14. What did you learn in this position? a. About yourself? b. About the youth? c. About youth workers? 15. How did your experiences here shape your beliefs about youth work? Can you tell me about subsequent jobs you have had in youth work? (Return to set of questions above)
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C. Occupational Identity: Doing the work & persisting	As you know, one of my interests in this study is learning about what sustains people in this work over time. In this portion of the interview, I'm going to ask you to reflect on your years in the field as well as about your current work: 1. What (or who) keeps you engaged in youth work? 2. Do you recall a time when you felt pulled in a different direction with your career? 3. Did you ever have an experience that made you question your choice of work? 4. Can you tell me where you work now and what you do in your current position? [Please indicate on this timeline when you started your current job] 5. What feels most important to you in your current job? 6. What energizes you and keeps you going? 7. What, if anything, frustrates you? 8. Who supports you? a. When you get stuck on the job, whom do you talk to? b. Where do you seek resources? 9. How does direct service fit into other responsibilities that you have? (Instructions: Offer paper for participant to visualize these responsibilities in different size circles or as an ordered list of time spent on activities) a. How much time do you spend directly with young people in your current role? b. Ideally, how much time would you like to work with youth in relation to other job responsibilities? 10. Do you think your beliefs about working with youth have changed over time? a. About this work more generally?
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D. Occupational Identity: Relational Identity & Boundary Making	In this next set of questions, I'm going to ask about your work in context of the broader youth work field as well as in relation to others. 1. Do you feel a sense of connection or community with other youth workers? If yes, in what ways? a. Are there forums or groups that you are or were part of to talk about your work? To advocate for it? 2. If we think about families, schools, religious organizations, where do you see your work fitting into a young person's life? (Instructions: Offer paper so participant can also respond by diagramming their answer to this question, using drawings and arrows to express relationships) a. I notice ____ this diagram. Can you tell me about this? 3. Based on your experience, how do you think people outside the field perceive youth workers? a. Youth? b. Families? c. Teachers? d. Funders? 4. Do you understand youth workers to be different than teachers? a. In what ways? 5. How do you describe your work to family and friends? 6. What do your family and friends think of your work? a. Do you think this has changed over time?
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E. Occupational Identity: Future Orientations	Instructions: Take a look at this timeline, the events on here and experiences we have discussed so far. I'm going to ask you some questions about your near and long-term future. 1. Where do you see yourself in the next 3 to 5 years? [Instructions: Can you indicate some of your anticipated goals in purple on the work history timeline?] a. Are there are long-term projects or work that you have dreams or goals for? 2. If I were an entry-level youth worker, interested in staying in this field, what advice would you give me about this work? a. Or, what advice would you tell to the younger version of yourself? 3. If you can imagine your retirement from youth work, what would you hope a speech given by one of your youth participants would entail? 4. What would you want to tell funders about this kind of work? a. Policymakers? b. Principals? c. Teachers?
F. Closing	Thank you so much for taking the time for this interview. Do you have any final thoughts that you would like to share? [I will stop the recording here] Can you recommend anyone who might be eligible and interested in participating in this study?

Appendix G: Field Note Example

Field note: *The “Ujima” girls are working in small groups on the first floor of North Adin City Youth Program, some hovering around a computer, editing images, another group are taking photos and holding placards with various identity affirmations, and another set is running through print outs of script — this is all in preparation for a family event tomorrow, where Ujima participants will present their photo-based project focused on positive messages for girls of color. I follow a familiar scent of cooking oil up to the second floor. Across from the cavernous indoor basketball court is a brightly lit kitchenette. Josué, wearing a woolen hat that says ADIN in all capital letters and gray sweatpants, is methodically cutting the thick outer skin of the plantains and carefully places each plantain piece in the simmering oil. We discuss the upcoming family day that his youth have been preparing for. “I’m going to check in on them, but I also want them to figure out a plan on their own.” This girls of color empowerment group, is one that Josué feels a particular sense of agency and pride in creating since he began his work at the center, so I imagine relinquishing control to let the youth lead is not always easy. Josué begin to take each plantain piece out with metal tongs, pressing down on each one with a flat wooden spoon, attending to each piece with Adobo seasoning, and guiding each one back in the metal wok for the final fry. Josué asks me about my recruitment process, and I confess that it has become easier the more people I interview. “There’s a network, now that you’re in, it will be easier. Who else are you looking to interview?” Josué proceeds to pull out his phone and search his contacts for potential youth workers I can reach out to. Teens start drifting into the kitchen, recognizing the scent of freshly fried plantains. He passes paper plates to one of the youth leaders, who cuts these plates in half [this small act amuses me and makes me wonder; this could be a natural resourcefulness and act of sustainability, perhaps a cost cutting habit from working in youth programs with limited resources, or habits developed from less wasteful communities and home countries). The Ujima students crowd around Josué, drawn to his energy and nurturing spirit. Josué transfers the plantains in a large bowl, and the youth begin to line up to get their share.*

Appendix H: Sample Themes and Codes

Research Questions Chapter 4	Final Chapter Themes & Codes (Including in vivo)
(a) What motivates both entry and persistence in youth work? (b) How do intrinsic motivations shape occupational identity?	Nature of Entry ○ 'Accidental' ○ Full-Time Job ○ Part-Time Job ○ Passion Project ○ Volunteering ○ Program Participant ○ Career Change ○ “youth work chose me” Initial Motivations ○ Helping Others ○ Service ○ A Paycheck ○ Becoming a Mentor ○ Enjoyment ○ Growing Up in a Youth Program ○ Meaningful work ○ Seeking change Ongoing Motivations ○ “love” Callings ○ “whatever it takes” ○ <i>Social-Justice</i> ○ community change ○ fairness ○ justice ○ social justice ○ “make a difference” ○ “to be of use” ○ <i>Reflective and Corrective</i> ○ “cut from the same cloth” ○ “searching for a hero” ○ Identity Work; class ○ Identity Work; gender ○ Identity Work; race ○ <i>Place-Based</i> ○ Local commitments ○ Local needs ○ “everyone wants a home”

	○ <i>Spiritual</i> ○ “God’s gift” ○ spiritual ○ higher purpose ○ prayer ○ “ministry” Boundaryless <i>Time</i> ○ On Call ○ “You can’t punch out” ○ Late evenings ○ Changing Boundaries ○ Negotiating Boundaries ○ Work-life balance <i>Engagement</i> ○ Family Engagement ○ Partnering with Schools ○ Personal boundaries ○ Professional boundaries ○ Youth as family ○ Youth work as family work <i>CoExisting Identities</i> ○ Disciplinary Knowledge (Multiple) ○ Relationship between Occ. Identities ○ “I contain multitudes”

Intermediate Coding Spreadsheet

Barriers in Existing Literature	Emergent Barriers (Emic Codes)	Example
Finances	Gentrification	<i>"With YouthActNow it's hard because a year from now my lease is going to be up and my rent is going to go up and my salary is not...My money, I'm finding that I'm at a place where I'm like, man, my budget is really tight. You want me to stay in Winterton and keep doing this work, but the city is becoming so expensive. You get money from the city, except none of it is... it's not even that I want it in my pocket. What upsets me is that if I left, to get someone else they'll have to pay them probably \$20,000 more than me and they're going to pay them that for all the work that I did."</i> – Derrick, Age 35
Low Pay Part-Time Jobs (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006)	Affordability	
	Student Debt	
	Financial Toll on Families	
No or Few Benefits (e.g. Health Care, Retirement Plan, Paid Time Off) (NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006)	Un-Friendly Family Policies	<i>"DreamBig has really bad maternity leave, and it's a program focused on girls becoming strong women! How can DreamBig not be supportive of women? Organizations have take care of their people - I have to take care of my people. I don't regret it [taking the promotion]."</i> - Thien, Age 33
	Withholding Benefits	
Low Status (e.g. within organization, public legitimacy) (Borden, 2002; Emslie, 2013; Fusco, 2012; LaRoche & Klein, 2008; Stone, Garza, & Borden, 2004; Wisman, 2012)	-Isms: Racism, Sexism, Adultism	<i>[My parents say] "You need to go somewhere and make some more money. They see me because I have so much student loans and they're like, "You're struggling. You should not be working this much, especially since you have loans. You need to go do something else." I think they understand that I love what I do, they just don't think that this is the only thing I should be doing."</i> -Aminata, Age 25
	Undervaluation Within Organizations	
	Familial Pressures to Exit	
Lack of Supervision; Minimal Supervision (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006)	External Supervision Unfamiliar or Inexperienced with Youth Work (Credentialing Mismatch)	<i>The director, he was a knucklehead. He was someone you couldn't trust. For example, I was working a weekend once and I had a crisis in the house, a kid was having a psychological emergency and I had two other kids that needed to be supervised because they were trying to run off and have sex all the time. I called the on-call staff to be like, "I need support, things are going crazy, this kid's breaking down and the other two can't be unsupervised." And it was just me and one other staff person and there was too much going on and he was my on-call staff. He was supposed to come in and support, and he was like, "I can't come in, just call 911." And I</i>
	Philosophical Differences between Supervisor & Staff	
	"Incompetent" Leadership	

Under-Prepared/Under-trained on entry (Anderson-Nathe (2008; NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006)	☒	<i>think he was home drinking and that's why he couldn't come in. It was an awful lack of leadership and high stress.</i> -Claire, Age 37 <i>"I had no idea what I was doing. I got put in a room with, I want to say like 20, 30 kids. Half the room was white kids, half the room was black kids, and Latinos. The white kids didn't like me because I was Latino, the black kids and Spanish kids kind of just took me in, and we became really good friends. It took awhile for the white kids to open up. But I wasn't prepared at all, I didn't know what I was doing. There wasn't a curriculum, a what? What is that? I had no idea what I was doing, I was literally coming up with projects on the spot. What are we going to do today? "We'll take pictures of ourselves using reflection off metal objects." They was like, "Oh, that's really dope, how'd you come up with that?" I was like, "I be thinking about this all the time." A lot of times it's just what I see around me. I'm really fast on my feet, and I can come up with decent ideas pretty fast."</i> - Pablo, Age 35
Weak Links between Training & Advancement (NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006)	"Isms:" Racism, Sexism, Adulthood	<i>"I felt like more guys were getting these [youth work] positions back then, than women were, especially women of color. I think there were a lot more white women that were in those kind of teacher roles, and not more people of color, whether that be male or female. And so I think that was throwing me off quite a bit."</i> - Genevieve, Age 35
Scarce opportunities for job advancement or growth (LaRoche & Klein, 2008; NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006)	Youth Work as Luxury Staying in the field becomes a "luxury" for those who can afford to stay at the same salary – ultimately blocking youth workers from low-income backgrounds	<i>"I met a number of AmeriCorps members, and ideally you want to hire, like we talked about before, people of color that reflect the backgrounds of the girls we're serving. But...In order to be an AmeriCorps member, you have to be able to afford to be an AmeriCorps member because it's a volunteer position. You get a very small stipend. You can't really live on your own. It's hard, so you end up having people who come from more affluent families who, or the families can support them, can pay for their apartments or whatever. It seems like something's wrong there. The people that we want that have the skills and the knowledge, just can't afford to do it."</i> -Emilia, Age 50
Unclear Career Pathways	☒	

(Stone, B., Garza, P., & Borden, L., 2004; Fusco, 2012; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006)

**High Demand,
Emotional Stress, &
Vicarious Trauma**

(Anderson-Nathe; 2008; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; LaRoche & Klein, 2008; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006)

**“Boundaryless”
Culture**

First Responders

Emotional Burnout

I think that there are some days when it feels like the relationship with the kids is what keeps you grounded, and what keeps you going and keeps you excited coming back every day. There's a part of me that feels like if I didn't have that it might be hard to seem motivated. On the flip side of that it's like I feel like this is a young kid's game, working with young people.

I wonder sometimes if I'm getting jaded or just don't have the energy. I know I'm not so old. I'm only 29, but when I was a camp counselor and I was 20 years old, the amount of energy I was able to bring. We also have two AmeriCorp and they both just graduated college, and to see that kind of energy that they are able to bring, I guess at no point do I want to do a disservice to the kids. I want to be able to bring full energy and full attention, and I just think that you definitely see people that stay in youth work too long, just because it's what they've known, and they don't really want to think about or like teachers. I feel like the same thing teachers you are like you should have retired 20 years ago, what are you still doing, doing this? You know what I mean?

- Christina, Age 29

**Increased Managerial &
Bureaucratic Control**
(Baldrige, 2014, 2018; Fusco, D., Lawrence, A., Matloff-Nieves, S., & Ramos, E., 2013)

**Organizational
Politics; Racism**

Tokenism

Lack of Agency

I gave them the people who I thought would benefit from the trip and would make us look good at the same time. There was a Dominican girl, there was a Haitian girl, and there was a White girl. I gave them my list, and I explained why I chose those three. They were all A students, they were well behaved, they were well spoken, and they were motivated to do different things. They would be perfect, and they would make us [SafeZone] look really good. None of the kids I chose were chosen. I said, "Why would you choose them? They weren't listening to the kids because of the color of their skin, they weren't accepting them to do different things than they had [done before]. But if they needed a poster child they go grab those kids, and take pictures with them, and we're on the news, and we're in newspapers.

- Pablo, Age 35

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