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I am a youth researcher whose primary goal is to support the holistic wellbeing of youth who experience cumulative and convergent risks to healthy development. Specifically, I am interested in how social group memberships, including race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender, impact youths' mental health and overall well-being. My research, seeks understand the ways that organizations, programs and practitioners can foster well-being among marginalized youth. Identifying, translating and disseminating, theoretically grounded approaches that are contextually relevant is a critical step toward improving youth development outcomes in community-based settings.

My research program is motivated by over six years of experience as a mental health practitioner, focused on positive youth development in various community-based social service organizations. I became particularly interested in the design, evaluation and implementation of youth development programs, in my role as a Graduate Research Fellow at the Hearth of Missouri United Way. I oversaw the annual reporting and evaluation of health and mental health programs. Engaging with my community partners, I developed a youth development and mental health programs, including adapting and implementing evidence-based programs for schools, community-based youth programs. I have worked on several of my federally-funded research projects. One of which is with Survey Research Division at Social Development Research Group to evaluate the effectiveness of the School of Social Work's Screening for Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment Training Program. This partnership with the Northwest Leaders in SBIRT team for this SAMHSA sponsored research and presented this work at the Society for Social Work Research's annual meeting in Washington DC. I also worked on the Connecting Supplement Study, where I facilitated focus groups and engaged in coding and manuscript development for this project focusing on LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care. Subsequently I was invited to facilitate focus groups to develop an extension of Friends of the Children, a paid mentoring program to support youth in foster care. Relevant to this topic area is a recently published article in Child Welfare, Developing relationship building tools for foster families caring for teens who are LGBTQ2S.

In my independent scholarship, I draw on theoretical perspectives from critical social work, liberation theology, social psychology and youth sociology to understand the contextual and political forces that inform youth development. The primary goal of my scholarship is to conduct research that empowers marginalized youth to be critical thinkers and change agents who are committed to eliminating structural and material inequities within their communities. Currently, my research focuses on community organizations that positions youth as active- not passive- participants in community life. The primary aim is to better understand the process of sociopolitical development among youth of color in low-income communities. My sole-authored manuscript "Developing Social Capital among youth of color in low income communities" extends on this idea.

My dissertation and early career research agenda is dedicated to addressing the environment and institutions that continue to constrain youth agency and successful development among youth of color. Situated in a critical social work perspective, transformative youth development programs offer a promising approach to address structural barriers to healthy youth development.

Compared to prevention and positive youth development programs that tend to situate youth problems at the individual and family levels, transformative youth programs understand youths embeddedness in the context of the social, political, economic and racial structures that exist in the United States. The purpose of my dissertation project is to pilot an evidenced based diversity curriculum, Intergroup Dialogue, among 10th and 11th grade students that attend Garfield High School. My dissertation project will evaluate the implementation and youth outcomes that result from participation in IGD. IGD is an evidence-based practice model that uses critical pedagogy and experiential learning to help students understand privilege, oppression, conflict and dialogue. IGD courses align with a transformative philosophy toward youth development. Primarily in that the overall goal is to help students understand how power and privilege are related to various types of inequalities and engage students community change activities.

Moving forward, I intend to advance my research program on youth future orientation, place, and health by applying for early-career supports such as the William T. Grant Scholarship. I see this upcoming phase of research situated within settings that actively involve communities, especially youth, in addressing conjoint problems of poverty and mental health. My program of research, grounded in my practice experience and interdisciplinary training, will inform the development of place-based interventions targeting youth who experience multiple forms of marginalization (social and economic). In this way, I plan to “return to my roots,” using the university-assisted community school model of collaboration. I believe democratic and mutually-beneficial partnerships between universities, K-12 schools, and other community-based organizations are fundamental to the goals of my research agenda: promoting holistic youth development.