Keeping pace: Understanding Youth Engagement in Rural America Through Family Structure Lenses

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ABSTRACT

With rapid shifts in the family economy, various family structures have continually emerged. Understanding the impact these changes have on youth engagement is foundational to developing interventions that will encourage participation in community life. Factors including rural-urban migration, the great recession, lower fertility rates, marrying at older ages and influx of women into professional employment have contributed to the emergence of new and more complex family types such as single parent and blended families[1].

Youth growing up in these evolving settings (changing family structures) are vested with uncommon challenges. With less than 46% of children born into intact families[2], understanding the impact these challenges have on the ability of youth to stay engaged in family and community life is foundational to the building of appropriate interventions.

Poverty, low educational attainment and lack of employment opportunities, increase the likelihood of breakdown and inadvertently disturb the emotional equilibrium of the home environment[3, 4]. These factors increase the likelihood of breakdown within resource-limited rural communities placing them at a disadvantage compared to families resident in urban areas[5].

Gap
Studies have not focused on the situation-specific challenges youth from disconnected families in rural areas face with staying engaged.

Diagrammatic representation of Nvivo nodes/ codes

OBJECTIVES

➢ Review community member's understanding of the role of family in youth engagement

➢ Identify current barriers to the inclusion and development of youth from non-intact families in community development and health promoting activities

➢ Explore the extent to which changing family structures impacts youth engagement and possible community-based interventions necessary to bootstrap youth engagement

METHODS

QUALITATIVE

This study was conducted in two towns - Mercer and Princeton – in Mercer County, Missouri. This forms part of an on-going three-phased study being conducted in rural Western Cape, South Africa and rural Missouri, USA. Findings reported are from Missouri data.

➢ Mercer County has a total population of 3,694.

➢ Both Mercer and Princeton are about 12 miles apart.

➢ Resources within the community include: two elementary, middle and high schools, a health department, courthouse, senior center, hog industry and a Dollar General store

➢ Data was obtained by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with 16 community leaders.

➢ Interviews were transcribed verbatim and the researcher's used content analysis to analyze interview data. Interviews were coded using Nvivo 11 software.

➢ Ethical approvals from the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board, and the University of Western Cape Review Board was obtained.

RESULTS

Perceptions on family roles in youth development and health promotion
Community members suggested that family was foundational to youth engagement in the community by providing **support**, **role-modelling** and **mentorship**.

[W]hether you're talking health or behavior or anything, I think what is supported in the home takes first priority because they see that every day(COPMO26)…your love of the community comes from where you grow up (COPMO22)…a lot of the group that are drinking a lot, the ones I see, it's kind of a family tradition (COPMO23)

Barriers to engaging youth from structurally diverse backgrounds
Community members felt that the lack of stability and support typified by non-intact families, was a challenge to engaging youth from these evolving family structures. Some of the problems attributed to non-intact families were **lack of commitment**, **loss of parental figures** and **conflicting messages from parents.**

There's so many blended families now, which brings a whole new, problem to the table (COPMO19)…they (youth) see basically the hopelessness of the adults in relationships and, marriage, drugs, you name it, and they just grow up with no hope, seem like a lot of them do (COPMO21).

Effects of changing family structures on youth development
Participants alluded to the propensity for youth from non-intact families to engage in behaviors that were either detrimental to their health or not participate in any community activities entirely.

They get a lot of disrespect from the other kids around, especially in school, and here in the last couple of years we've had a terrible situation with cell phones and cameras, the kids have lowered themselves to taking pictures of themselves, you know, whether they be naked or whatever, and putting it out over the internet (COPMO30).

Current opportunities and potential solutions
Community members felt that the combined effort of **peer groups**, **schools**, **churches** and **community organizations** would provide a support structure necessary for youth from disconnected families to remain engaged.

[A]nd having kids work a lot of hours of community service so that they understand there are needs within the community and that as a member of that community you should always want to better where you live. (COPMO31)…Well, as far as children go or teenagers, I think our best effort would be if we had teenagers helping teenagers. (COPMO21).

CONCLUSIONS

➢ Understanding the pathways leading to youth disengagement through the lens of family disconnectedness is beneficial.

➢ Developing collaborative and interdependent relationships between communities, schools, and churches; and families will provide the support necessary to mediate potential effects of changing family structures on youth outcomes.

➢ Based on insights provided, policies may be tailored to keep youth from these family types engaged.
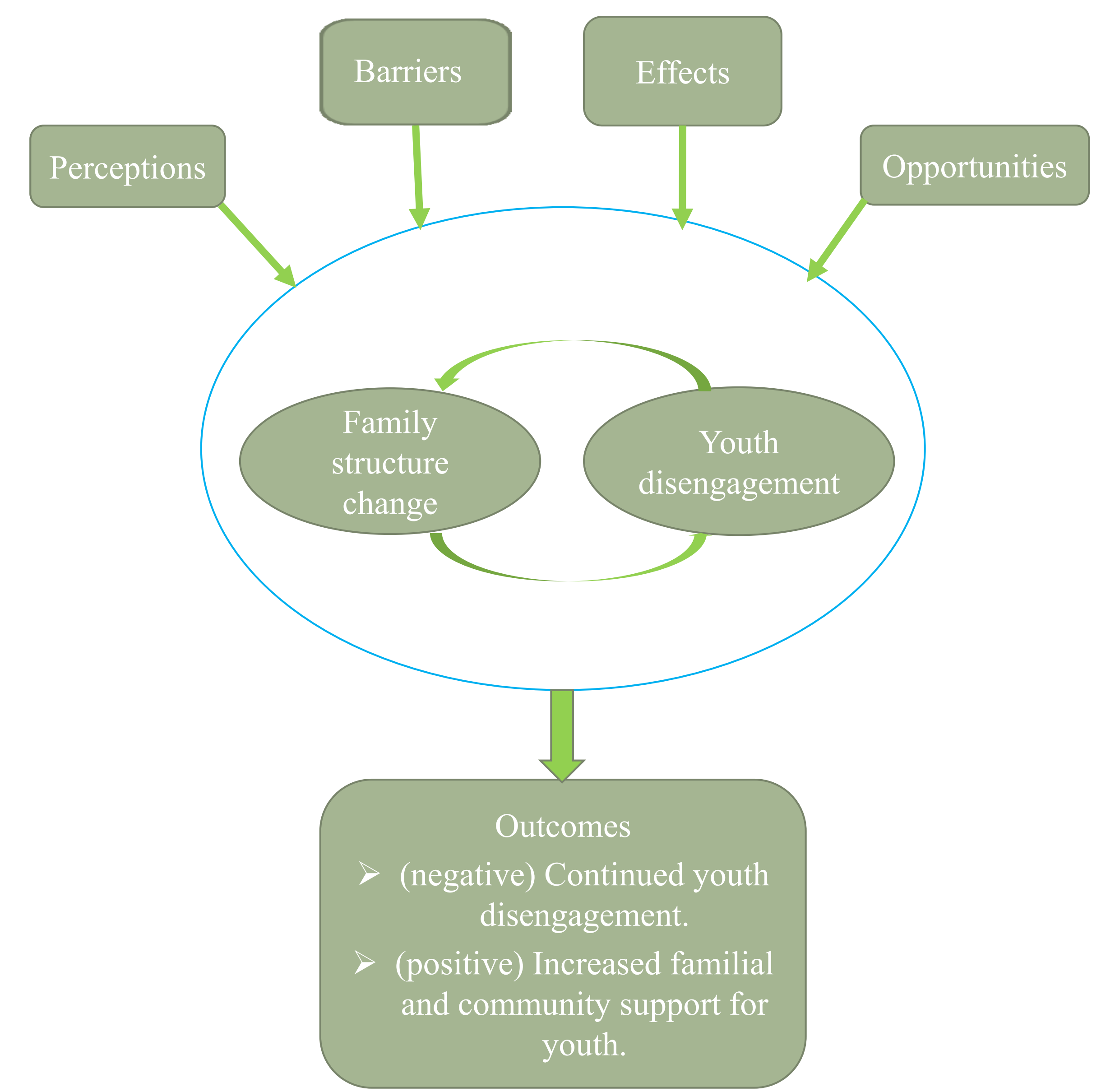
Diagrammatic conceptualization of findings

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