
Perceptions of Empowerment of Participants within Youth Development Programs

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Abstract: Highlighted in this paper is a study designed to investigate perceptions of empowerment among young 4-H club members. Participants included 90 boys and girls (mean age 10.61). Perceptions of the autonomy supportive nature of 4-H leaders and the general climate of 4-H clubs were assessed. MANCOVA analyses revealed participants perceived 4-H leaders and the general climate to be empowering. Although the young participants in this study confirmed some of the positive views found elsewhere in the literature, considerable disparities in their responses to various surveys were noted. There appeared to be uncertainty or misunderstanding among youngsters when asked to respond to questions about these concepts. The need for more useful quantitative measures of programmatic impact was accentuated.

Introduction

4-H programs began in the late 1800's in order to meet the needs for a better agricultural education among the youth (History of 4-H, 2007). Most of these programs were started and continue outside of schools. In the early 1900's, 4-H clubs partnered with land-grant institutions of higher education and what is now the United States Department of Agriculture. In the early 1900's, the United States Department of Agriculture allowed for the creation of boys and girls clubs, which became 4-H. Starting in the 1960's, efforts and resources that had been devoted more heavily toward agricultural and home economic topics were being moved to programs that emphasize science, technology, and healthy living (History of 4-H, 2007).

The mission statement of 4-H now emphasizes empowering youth, working in partnerships with caring adults and reflects the focus of positive youth development. Adolescents are allowed to make contributions and recognize their own worth as leaders and the community is strengthened by this partnership. As Cindy Ballard of the National 4-H Council notes, "...if they're not given those leadership roles, they'll seek them elsewhere, even if that means in

gangs" (p. 124 of Jueds, 1994). She also asserts that, "Gangs have just done a much better job of meeting [children's] needs than society has" (p. 124). Self-determination theory (SDT); Deci & Ryan, (1980, 1985b, 1991) specifically addresses the self-directed behavior that 4-H is designed to cultivate.

Significance

Contemporary theories of motivation suggest that behaviors are initiated and maintained to a degree that is commiserate with beliefs of desired outcomes or goals. Self-determination theory suggests a different approach to understanding goal-directed behavior. SDT makes a distinction between the content of the goals and the process for pursuing goals or outcomes. SDT further explains that the degree to which people can satisfy their psychological needs has a significant impact on goal pursuit. Self-determination theory identifies psychological needs as competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Although competence and relatedness are important elements for children owning values (Deci & Ryan, 2000), these needs must also be accompanied by feelings of autonomy. According to Deci & Ryan (2000, p. 238), "...although support for relatedness and competence needs may promote the internalization of a regulation or value, those supports alone will not be sufficient to foster integration."

Environments that are autonomy-supportive have a greater influence on the internalization of values and the self-regulation of values (Grolnick, Ryan & Deci, 1991; Williams & Deci, 1996). In environments that do not support autonomy, children are less likely to engage in desired behaviors, and experience feelings that are not conducive to healthy relationships (Assor, Roth & Deci, 2000). Designing youth development programs that are autonomy supportive is crucial for creating healthy relationships among the participants and leaders and for children to regulate their own engagement in positive behaviors. Measuring the presence of autonomy support is an important assessment of youth development programs.

In 1999-2000, the National 4-H Impact Assessment Project attempted to assess the effectiveness of 4-H programs on a national scale related to six different components. These components are related to: adults in 4-H, feelings about 4-H, learning in 4-H, helping others, planning and decision making and belonging in 4-H. The survey items assessed perceptions of the impact of 4-H in each of these six components and "critical elements of success," which include: a positive relationship with an adult, a safe environment, opportunities for mastery, opportunities to value and practice service to others, opportunities for self-determination, an inclusive environment, an opportunity to see oneself as part of the future and engagement in learning (National 4-H Impact Assessment Project, 2001). These constructs are mentioned by many authors as foundations of "best practices" of youth development programs (Ames, 1992; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; National Academy of Sciences, 2002; Werner, 1993). The results of the national 4-H assessment project indicate that there are very positive feelings toward 4-H from youth participants and adult leaders in regards to all survey items.

The authors of the National 4-H Impact Assessment Project (2001) indicate that, "4-H youth development programs reflect very positively the critical elements that researchers identify as essential to positive growth and development" (p. 5). The assumption from the beginning of the National Assessment research is that the critical elements are present in 4-H and all that is left is to determine how these elements affect the youth participants. Very few studies exist demonstrating the degree to which critical elements are present in youth development programs. The National 4-H Impact Assessment Project was the first national attempt to

quantify the outcomes in youth that result from the presence of critical elements in a 4-H setting.

Purpose of Study

While the National 4-H Impact Assessment Project was the first national attempt to quantify the outcomes in youth that result from the presence of the "critical elements of success" in a 4-H setting, this premise is the inherent weakness in the research project. The assumption from the beginning of this research is that the critical elements are present in 4-H and all that is left is to determine how these elements affect the youth participants. The presence of critical elements has been taken for granted as an obvious characteristic of any program that involves young people. It has been this assumption that has informed too much of current youth development research.

And because of this, despite the well-worn claims that participation in after-school "youth development" activities and programs can build responsibility, character, and autonomy, there are few programs willing to put these claims to an actual test. Thus, this study was designed to determine the perceptions of an empowering (autonomy-supportive) climate among the participants of an out-of-school 4-H program.

Methods

Participants

The study involved 90 4-H club members who, as members of 15 conveniently sampled 4-H clubs, consented to participate in this study. The gender composition of the club member sample was 43 boys (47.8%) and 47 girls (52.2%). The sample makeup in the present study mirrors recent national 4-H figures. The National 4-H Council (2001) indicates that girls make up 53% and boys make up 47% of participating members. The mean age of the participant sample was 10.61 (standard deviation = 1.62 years.)

Participants in this study were a convenience sample of youth and adults selected from 4-H programs in various counties in Colorado and from Utah, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas and Illinois. Although the participants in this study were a convenience sample, the author specifically chose members of 4-H clubs. In an attempt to explore empowerment as perceived by youngsters, it was desired to use members of a group that purports to facilitate empowerment.

Data Collection and Analysis

Surveys were completed by club members during regularly scheduled monthly meetings. During each meeting, the purpose of the study was explained to the club members and their parents. The surveys used, were shown to the parents and club members and time for questions was provided. During survey completion, club members completed the survey in the presence of the author in case there was a lack of clarity in the survey items.

Building on the work of both Harter (1982) and Connell (1985), in order to avoid answering formats that elicited socially desirable responses, Grolnick, Ryan and Deci (1991) developed the Children's Perceptions of Parents Scale. This scale was developed to evaluate the perceptions of children about their own parenting environment, believing that parenting environments develop or forestall internal motivation styles (Grolnick, Ryan & Deci, 1991). The scale is comprised of 11 items that elicit responses about mothers and 11 that elicit responses about fathers.

The Perceptions of Parents Scale (POPS) was modified for this study, replacing the words “mother and father” with “4-H leader.” Because the questions for mothers and fathers are identical, only 11 of the POPS questions were used in this study. The youth participants were asked to read descriptions of four different types of 4-H leaders and then decide which one is the best description of their own 4-H leader. The survey structure was also altered slightly for use in the present study.

Adapted from the Health Care Climate Questionnaire (Williams, Grow, Freedman, Ryan, & Deci, 1996), the Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ) (Williams & Deci, 1996) was used to evaluate the overall 4-H climate. The questions can be adapted so that the wording of each question pertains to the particular situation being studied or the questions can be stated so that a general learning climate can be assessed. This questionnaire examines the autonomy support of the climate overall, rather than that of an individual leader or teacher.

In order to use the Learning Climate Questionnaire with 4-H participants, the word “instructors” was replaced with “4-H leaders.” The encounters described in the LCQ were not altered otherwise. The LCQ was used to measure the perceptions of autonomy support of the 4-H leaders in general. Youth participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements regarding encounters with their 4-H leaders.

Results

A confirmatory factor analysis in the present study did not yield similar two factor loadings as in the original Grolnick, et al., (1991) study. The original POPS items loaded on an involvement subscale and an autonomy support subscale. Rather, using a principle component analysis extraction method with a promax rotation (duplicating procedures used in developing the original POPS), four factors emerged. Items that loaded on more than one factor and those items that explained little of the variance were removed from further analysis. Cronbach’s alphas for the involvement subscale and the autonomy support subscale both were .49. Similar to the findings of Grolnick, Ryan and Deci (1991), who used a principle components procedure with a promax rotation, all loadings on the appropriate factor exceeded .35 while the cross loadings never exceeded .36. See Table 1 for modified POPS factor loadings.

Table 1
Correlation Matrix for 11-item Modified POPS Scale (n=90)

Correlations											
Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	-	.154	.035	.287**	.297**	.137	-1.91	.071	.239**	.073	.013
2		-	.070	.057	.127	.218**	.096	.029	.070	-.022	.090
3			-	.018	.193	-.162	.027	.073	.053	-3.27**	.340**
4				-	.252**	.200	.025	.169	.208*	.229*	.090
5					-	.133	.016	.255*	.227*	.057	.225*
6						-	.071	.180	.232*	.255*	-.140
7							-	.080	-.077	.132	-.040
8								-	-.047	.106	.194
9									-	-.091	.042
10										-	-.245*

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)
* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

In order to address the major questions outlined a MANCOVA test was used. Analyses related to each question are presented below. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for each of the four measures for all 90 participants.

Table 2
Factor Loading for 11-item Modified POPS (n=90)

Promax Rotated Factor Matrix					
	1	2	3	4	Communality
Item 1	.597	--	-.426	-.120	.553
Item 2	.352	--	--	.710	.639
Item 3	.168	.720	.144	--	.576
Item 4	.626	-.156	--	-.260	.484
Item 5	.680	.204	--	-.129	.530
Item 6	.489	-.480	--	.319	.572
Item 7	--	-.162	.668	.367	.608
Item 8	.427	--	.543	-.331	.588
Item 9	.486	--	-.475	.247	.526
Item 10	.199	-.712	.227	-.251	.661
Item 11	.259	.670	.239	-.108	.584

A cursory review of the above table indicates that participants generally rated empowerment favorably on all measures, and with little variance on any single measure. The learning climate measure yields average scores ranging from 1 to 7, and the other three measures yield averages from 1 to 4 each. Although the mean score for leader involvement (3.35) is slightly greater than the means for leader support or opportunities for choice (3.06 and 3.05, respectively) a MANCOVA did not reveal any statistically significant differences among youngsters' responses to the four measures (see Table 3).

Table 3
Correlation Matrix for 6-item Modified POPS (n=90)

Correlations						
Items	1	5	9	7	8	10
1	-	.297**	.239**	-.191	.071	.073
5		-	.227	.016	.255*	.057
9			-	-.077	-.047	-.091
7				-	.080	.132
8					-	.106
						-
** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)						
* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)						

To examine gender and age effects on the four outcome measures, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) using age as the covariate was determined to be the most appropriate analytic procedure. The final MANCOVA revealed no significant effects for age, gender, or 4-H leader.

Analysis of the data indicated that youngsters generally have favorable perceptions of empowerment in their after-school 4-H programs. They view the overall 4-H climate as

empowering. Also they regard their adult 4-H leaders as involved and autonomy supportive and as individuals who provide young 4-H club members with opportunities for choice. These perceptions held true irrespective of gender or age. Moreover, while there were too few members in each sampled club to determine statistically if perceptions differed across clubs, the low variability on all measures suggests that club was not a factor.

Implications for Practice

Analysis of the data indicated that youngsters generally have favorable perceptions of empowerment in their 4-H programs. They view the overall 4-H climate as empowering. The 4-H participants also regard their adult 4-H leaders as involved and autonomy supportive, and as individuals who provide young 4-H club members with opportunities for choice. These perceptions held true irrespective of gender or age. Moreover, while there were too few members in each sampled club to determine statistically if perceptions differed across clubs, the low variability on all measures suggests that club was not a factor.

The present study was an investigation conducted to determine the perceptions of empowerment of individuals involved in youth development programs and the adult leaders of those programs. On the LCQ, the findings indicate that club members believe the overall climate of the 4-H club is more autonomy supportive than not. The mean score suggests that the overall climate of the 4-H club may be offering opportunities for youngsters to become engaged in making choices and/or taking an active role in asking questions or having their ideas acknowledged.

There was no difference between perceptions of climate between males and female club members. The youths in this study generally remarked that the 4-H club environment did support their autonomy. Other studies using the LCQ (Williams & Deci, 1996) did not find gender differences of the participants using the LCQ, which supports the results of the current study. This result is not similar however, to the results of a study completed by the National 4-H Council (2001).

The results of LCQ share some similarities with the results of a national 4-H study (2001), which asked leaders and club members questions regarding their experiences in 4-H. The 4-H study, conducted by the National 4-H council, was trying to determine the extent to which characteristics deemed "critical elements" of 4-H clubs exist. Although self-determination was deemed a critical element, there were no questions, in the national 4-H study on the survey specific to self-determination (e.g., autonomy, empowerment).

There are aspects of 4-H that certainly do support club members as agents of empowerment. Club members have opportunities to participate in various projects and are allowed the opportunities to choose to participate in any of these various projects. This is a positive aspect of 4-H as a youth development organization. There are limitations within the structure of 4-H however. As one 4-H leader said to me, "Once you decide on your project(s), everyone has to do pretty much the same thing and everyone's record book has to be kept pretty much the same way." This structure facilitates club members becoming passive about their experiences in 4-H.

Perceptions of Autonomy Support and Involvement

The mean scores suggest that generally, club members found their 4-H leaders to be involved and autonomy supportive. This is true regardless of the gender or age of the club member.

These results reflect the generally positive perception of 4-H leaders, by club members, found in a study conducted by the National 4-H Council (2001). In this survey, club members had positive perceptions of the adult leaders in 4-H. Questions asked in the 4-H survey regarded the adults influence over affective constructs (e.g., adults in 4-H make children feel good about themselves), and supporting involvement in the club (e.g., Adults in 4-H help children feel they can make a difference).

The involvement and autonomy support of a parent, or in the case of the current study, leaders of a group not only have a personal impact on the members of a group, but also influences the type of climate in which the group operates. While the club members perceived the climate and the adult leaders to be supportive of autonomy, the nature of the questions may, in part, explain the responses given by the club members.

Certain practices within 4-H (i.e., participants are given some choices) may interfere with the perceptions of the adult leaders. Although elementary and middle school children are able to make distinctions among domains of activity (e.g., school, athletics) (Harter, 1982) they may have difficulty discerning between the choices inherent in 4-H and how the 4-H leaders support choice.

Conclusion

Two primary conclusions may be drawn from this study. First, from the perspective of youth participants, the overall climate of the 4-H club is an empowering one. Irrespective of age, gender, or club membership, the 4-H climate was generally viewed as supporting autonomy. Second, youth participants perceive their adult leaders to be supportive of autonomy, involved, and willing to provide opportunities for choice. Again, these perceptions differed neither according to age, gender, nor club membership.

Although other studies regarding autonomy support have reported gender or grade-level effects, the results of the current study revealed no such differences among youngsters' perceptions of 4-H climate and leaders. Also, a study conducted by the National 4-H council indicated that as children get older, they begin to question 4-H as a valid opportunity for learning and decision-making. Again, no such age differences were detected in the present study.

For clubs involved in this study and for other youth development organizations, it seems prudent to include empowerment as a goal. This will require constant and conscious efforts to provide youngsters with greater opportunities and support for understanding, making, and accepting choices. Empowering climates coupled with appropriate autonomy-supportive behaviors from adult leaders can influence the emergence of intrinsically motivated behavior.

Although claimed as an important objective in many youth development programs, few programs have defined, much less operationalized, empowerment. Moreover, despite some researchers' attempts to characterize empowerment in terms of adult involvement, autonomy support, and opportunities for making choices, there appears to be uncertainty or misunderstanding among youngsters when asked to respond to questions about these concepts. Support for this statement derives from the lack of reliability that was identified within measures accompanied by a lack of relationship across measures used in the present study.

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Dr. Busing earned his Ph.D. in Exercise Science from the University of Northern Colorado. While there, he focused his studies around youth development and pedagogy and worked in many programs serving at-risk youth. He currently teaches Exercise Science at Schreiner University. His research focuses on autonomy and empowerment within youth programs and the effect of autonomy and empowerment on exercise adherence.