Can 4-H Involvement Have a Positive Impact on 4-H Youth's Bullying Beliefs and Behaviors?

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Abstract: Bullying has negative emotional and physical effects on youth which often continues into adulthood. Bullying can contribute to emotional distress which is often more difficult to detect in victims. Documented effects of bullying include depression, anxiety, bitterness, elevated levels of stress, as well as negative feelings of self-image and low self-esteem. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that involvement in the state 4-H program has on bullying beliefs and behaviors. This study found that 94% of the participants (senior high students) agreed that 4-H helped them to shape their belief towards bullying; 84% either agreed or strongly agreed that 4-H has helped them be more confident around strangers; and 93% indicated that 4-H helped them to gain confidence in situations so they could speak up for themselves.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The National 4-H organization has made a positive impact on the lives of many youth across the nation and around the world. Georgia 4-H has a strong history dating back to 1904 when G.C. Adams, Newton County Superintendent, decided to bring a group of boys together to teach them about farming corn. Since that day, there have been hundreds of thousands of people who have benefited from this great organization, with currently 180,000 members in Georgia 4-H and 6.7 million nationally. The mission of the 4-H program is to help youth gain knowledge, develop life skills, and form attitudes that will enable them to become self-directing, productive, and contributing members of society. The essential elements of 4-H are mastery, belonging, generosity, and independence, and 4-H faculty work to instill these ideas in participating youth. The four elements work together to create an environment that allows youth and adults to work together to make a positive change in themselves and the communities they live in. 4-H has not only been changing the life's of members in Georgia, but several studies conducted show the positive impact 4-H can have on a young person's life well into adulthood.

The benefits of participation in 4-H are numerous. Astroth and Haynes (2002) found that youth involved in 4-H were more likely to succeed in school, be involved as leaders in their school and community, be looked to as role models by other youth, as well as help others in their community. Additionally, Astroth and Haynes (2002) reported that children unsupervised after school are at a higher risk of stress, receiving poor grades, early experimentation with sex, and substance abuse. 4-H provides a place for youth to experience positive relationships with caring adults, opportunities for self-determination, an accepting environment, opportunities to contribute through community service, a safe environment for learning and growing, opportunities to master skills, and opportunities to be an active participant in life (Astroth & Haynes, 2002).

Faculty and students of Tufts University conducted a longitudinal study on the positive impact 4-H has on youth involved in different types of 4-H programs. Their findings indicate that 4-H youth were substantially more likely than non 4-H youth to make contributions to their communities in grades 7 through 12 and 4-H participants reported higher academic competence and higher school engagement at grades 11 and 12 than participants enrolled in other after-school activities (Lerner & Lerner, 2010). It is evident that 4-H has a positive impact on youth involved and that 4-H teaches students to be accepting and self-driven.

Bullying is one of the most prevalent and widely discussed topics pertaining to safety and security (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2008). Bullying has been shown to have profound effects on youth which often continue into adulthood. To assess the impact of bullying, it is essential to establish a good, base definition. Salmivalli and Voeten (2008) define bullying as repeated negative actions targeted at an individual who has difficulty defending him/herself.

Bullying can contribute to emotional distress which is often more difficult to detect in victims. Documented effects of bullying include depression, anxiety, bitterness, elevated levels of stress, as well as negative feelings of self-image and low self-esteem which can all result from verbal bullying ("The effects of bullying," 2013). Victims of bullying are also found to have difficulty concentrating on school work and exhibit elevated levels of anxiety (Ballard, Tucky, & Remley, 1999). There can also be physical effects resulting from bullying. The obvious physical harm exhibited by physical bullying is bruises, cuts, or other unexplained injuries. A meta-analysis of

bullying research found that victims of all types of bullying are more likely to exhibit bouts of headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, bedwetting, and sleeping problems (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009).

As previously mentioned bullying is a significant concern among youth today. This national issue begs the question - are there programs that effectively assist youth in coping with the emotional and physical results of bullying? More specifically, does a youths' involvement in extracurricular activities such as 4-H help reduce the effects of bullying? Do students involved in 4-H react differently to bullying situations than those not involved? Furthermore, what is the relationship between students involved in 4-H and their bullying beliefs and behaviors? There are few studies that investigate the relationship between youth involvement in extracurricular activities, such a 4-H, and how a student reacts to bullying.

There has been some evidence suggesting that extracurricular activities can lead to positive influences such as student achievement (Broh, 2002; Crosnoe, 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999), self-esteem (Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 2001), positive perception of life changes (Jordan & Nettles, 2000; Perry-Burney & Takyi, 2002; Rees & Howell, 1990), and educational aspirations (Hanson & Kraus, 1998; Jordan & Nettles, 2000s; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003) and that involvement in organizations like 4-H can keep kids out of detrimental activities as well (Peguero, 2008). However, little is known about whether youth involvement with 4-H can lead to changes in bullying beliefs and behaviors.

The researchers chose to use the Social Cognitive Theory as the foundation for this research project because it stresses the importance of beliefs in motivating and regulating behavior (Bandura, 1986). The assumptions that social cognitive theory is based on are as follows: behavior is purposeful and driven by a goal; individuals are self-reflective; learners are able to self-regulate; and that reciprocal determinism takes place (Bandura, 1986, 1997). The three factors that allow one to evaluate behavior change within social cognitive theory (reciprocal determinism) are environment, personal factors, and behavior. The factor most closely linked to this study is the "environment."

According to Bandura (1986), environment is the factor that impacts a person's behavior and includes the physical environment (their physical surroundings) as well as social environment (the people or social situation they are in). One could postulate that a 4-H member's "normative" beliefs may have an impact on the member's behavior(s) regarding bullying. Huesmann and Guerra (1997) define normative beliefs as individualistic cognitive standards about acceptable or unacceptable behavior. These beliefs not only filter out inappropriate behaviors, but also may affect emotional reactions to others' actions (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). Social Cognitive Theory led the researchers to examine 4-H members' beliefs about bullying and if their behavior influenced their bullying beliefs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive study was to examine the impact that involvement in the state 4-H program has on bullying beliefs and behaviors. Do students involved in the state 4-H program feel more confident in certain situations? Does the 4-H program help reduce the effects of bullying on youth? Do students involved in 4-H react differently to bullying situations than those not involved? Does their belief about bullying influence their behavior? The following objectives guided this study:

1. Examine 4-H participant's knowledge of bullying;
2. Examine how involvement in the 4-H program shapes youths beliefs towards bullying;
3. Examine if a change in belief influences a change in behavior towards bullying; and
4. Determine which 4-H events had the greatest impact on the members' confidence level and ability to approach bullying from a proactive perspective.

Methods

This descriptive research design collected data using a researcher-developed questionnaire because a lack of research existed on the direct relationship between 4-H, bullying beliefs, and bullying behaviors. The questionnaire consisted of four constructs utilizing a 5-point Likert scale to assist the researchers in identifying 4-H youth's knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors toward bullying. Additionally, the questionnaire asked youth which Georgia 4-H activities increased their confidence to respond to and act in bullying situations.

The questionnaire was peer reviewed by County 4-H faculty, 4-H District faculty, and University researchers to ensure content and face validity. The survey was pilot tested to examine sensitivity of the items, validity, and reliability within constructs. It was distributed to 4-H participants in two counties with active 4-H programs. Of 46 youth with similar demographics to the study population invited to participate in the pilot test, only eight members completed the pilot questionnaire. None of the participants from the pilot study participated in the final study. With this low sample size, modified techniques were used to detect item response consistency and validity.

Pilot study data revealed that the reliability of the four constructs resulted in Cronbachs' alphas ranging from .63 to .74 with two of the four constructs showing an alpha of .70 or higher. According to Nunnally (1978), an alpha of .70 or higher is an acceptable reliability measurement; however, a lower alpha is not necessarily a detriment. Peterson's (1994) meta-analysis of research studies showed that seventy-five percent reported alphas of .70 or greater and that only forty-nine percent reported alphas of .80 or greater. Nunnally (1978) also reported that in the early stages of research, it can be acceptable to have only moderate reliability, particularly with smaller sample sizes as in the case of this pilot study. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the reliability values were deemed sufficient (Nunnally, 1978). Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to summarize the data in line with the research objectives.

The study population was comprised of 112 high school aged 4-H members who attended a weekend senior 4-H Conference at the Georgia 4-H Center. These participants were given a choice to participate in the study, with parents' permission. The researchers chose senior participants that had a minimum of four years of 4-H membership so as to insure that the youth had opportunities to participate in a variety of 4-H activities in hopes to gauge the true impact of 4-H. Of the 112 participants, 73 were females and 39 were males ranging in age from 14 to 18. Seventy-seven participants reported living in a rural area; 21 in the suburbs; and 14 in an urban setting.

At the conference, every 4-H member attended a *Bullying Workshop* where they participated in an activity called *The Party Plan.* During the activity, each participant was given a "title" written on a card and placed on their forehead. Examples of titles given were "Agree with everything I

say," "Put my ideas down," and "Ignore my ideas." The youth in their group were to treat the others how their title told them while planning a party. This activity opened up the topic of bullying before participants received the research questionnaire.

Findings

Objective One: determine 4-H participant's knowledge of bullying.

According to Salmivalli and Voeten (2008) bullying is the repeated negative actions targeted at an individual who has difficulty defending himself/herself. The participants in this study were asked if specific situations were considered bullying, by choosing a response on a five point scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Participants agreed or strongly agreed that making fun of people because they messed up on a classroom presentation (n=72, 65%), had a poor outfit choice (n=96, 86%), or did not want to participate in activities such as zip line at 4-H camp (n=92, 82%) were examples of bullying.

When asked if being teased only once or twice was not considered bullying, the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed (n=64, 58%) and 86% (n=96) agreed or strongly agreed that bullying was in fact that act of repeated negative actions. Given Salmivalli and Voeton's (2008) definition of bullying, these 4-H participants were knowledgeable of what constituted as bullying.

Objective Two: examine how involvement in the 4-H program shapes youths beliefs towards bullying.

According to Bandura (1986), a person's beliefs can have an impact on their behavior. The majority of participants in this study agreed or strongly agreed that bullying hurts people's feelings (n=110, 99%). The participants gave 4-H credit for shaping their belief (n=97, 86%) and teaching them to believe that bullying is negative (n=108, 96%). Participants also believed that it is important to stop the act of bullying (n=106, 95%) and understand that bullying is a big deal that effects many people (n=104, 93%). Lastly, they did not believe that it's the victim's fault that bullying occurs (n=94, 83%) and that befriending the victim is a nice gesture during and following a bullying situation (n=94, 83%).

Objective Three: examine if the change in belief effects a change in behavior towards bullying.

Social Cognitive Theory stresses the importance of beliefs in motivating behavior. The participants gave credit to 4-H for shaping their belief of bullying and for the confidence gained to react to bullying situations. Over 94% agreed that 4-H did have an impact on their belief and view of bullying; 84% (n=94) agreed or strongly agreed that 4-H has helped them be more confident around strangers, giving them the courage to stop bullying; 92% (n=101) indicated that 4-H helped to develop their actions during a bullying situation and helped them to gain confidence in situations so they could speak up for themselves (n=104, 93%).

Furthermore, 82% (n=91) of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they would not join in on the laughing of a fellow student or 4-H member and 70% (n=78) said they would stop the act if seen, and would tell an adult if needed (n=84, 75%). Lastly, the participants would not ignore a bullying act if seen (n=71, 64%) and would friend a person being bullied (n=81, 72%). It must be noted that 73% (n=81) of the participants admitted to being the victim of bullying and due to their participation in 4-H, they were able to ignore the act.

***Objective Four: determine which 4-H events had the greatest impact on members'
confidence level and ability to approach bullying from a proactive perspective.***
The participants indicated that 4-H Leadership Weekends had the greatest impact on their
confidence level to respond to a bullying situation followed by 4-H Leadership Roles/Officers
and 4-H Camp respectively (Table 1).

Table 1
4-H Event that gives Confidence to Members to Respond to a Bullying Situation (n=108)

4-H Event	N	%
4-H Leadership Weekends: Weekend Events where participants engage in leadership activities	34	31
4-H Leadership Roles/Officers	24	22
4-H Camp: Multiday overnight 4-H experience at a 4-H center	20	18
4-H Project Achievement: Individual project work in a focus area(s) cumulating in oral presentations.	18	16
4-H Community Involvement	6	5
4-H County Level Activities	1	1
All of the above	5	5

Secondly, participants were asked which 4-H activities increased their confidence to speak out
against bullying and stop the act. The most frequent answer was Leadership Roles followed by
Leadership Weekends and 4-H Project Achievement respectively (Table 2).

Table 2
4-H Event that gives Confidence to Speak Out Against Bullying (n=107)

4-H Event	n	%
4-H Leadership Roles/Officers	31	29
4-H Leadership Weekends	29	27
4-H Project Achievement	22	21
4-H Camp	10	9
4-H Community Involvement	9	8
All of the above	5	5

Finally, the participants were asked if there were certain 4-H activities that increased their
confidence to ignore a bullying situation and not let it affect them when being bullied. The most
frequent answer was Leadership Weekends followed by 4-H Project Achievement and 4-H Camp
(Table 3).

Table 3

Table 3
4-H Event that gives Confidence to Ignore the Bullying Situation (n=101)

4-H Event	n	%
Leadership Weekends	30	30
4-H Project Achievement	20	20
Leadership Roles/Officers	19	19
4-H Camp	14	14
County Level Activities	8	7
Community Involvement	4	4
All of the above	8	6

Conclusions and Recommendations

Bullying is a concern among people and continues to be an increasingly troubling issue nationally. This study suggests 4-H participants view bullying negatively and 94% give credit to 4-H for shaping their belief of bullying and increasing their self-confidence. It must be noted that when examining differences between the females and males who responded to the questionnaire, there was little difference in their answers on both beliefs and behaviors towards bullying. These findings support research by Fox, Schroeder, and Lodi (2003) which found that through 4-H experience, members gained life skills such as understanding others, communication, and self-confidence. The essential elements of 4-H are not only making 4-H members better at academics and being involved in the community, but also helping them to gain confidence to speak up for themselves and stand up for others.

The results of the study also showed that one of the main 4-H activities that fostered this gain in confidence was participation in leadership activities. Miller (1976) stated that the leadership skills developed in 4-H were decision making, relationship building, understanding self, group processes, and communication. Research conducted by Goodwin, et al. (2005) indicated that youth who participated in 4-H for two or more years were significantly better at avoiding risky life style choices than youth who did not participate in the program and are also more likely to take on leadership roles in their clubs, schools and community. Astroth and Haynes (2002) found similar results of 4-H youth – they were more likely to succeed in school and be involved as leaders in their school and community. Therefore 4-H leaders should continue to encourage members to be more active in local and state-wide events and take on leadership roles. The youth thereby gain confidence to speak up for themselves, stop a bullying act, and gain confidence to not allow bullying to affect them.

The results of this survey revealed a very positive aspect to youth being involved in Georgia 4-H which will add to the public value of the program. Extension Agents and Specialists could share these results with local school system administrators and guidance counselors so as to demonstrate the importance of 4-H programming at the local level and encourage continued and/or new support for in-school and after-school programming. Agents and Specialists could also use these results to maintain and/or increase the involvement of youth in 4-H by recruiting their parents and guardians. Recruitment and retention often relies on parents to keep youth involved, and results of this study may help encourage parental support of 4-H.

Results from this study also showed a strong correlation between 4-H Leadership Weekends and confidence in their reaction to a bullying situation. This result is in line with the Social

Cognitive Theory. Bandura (1986) postulates that "environment" is the factors that impact a person's behavior and include the physical environment (their physical surroundings) as well as social environment (the people or social situation they are in). To better determine the true impact of 4-H Leadership Weekends a qualitative study with a small focus group should be conducted with senior Georgia 4-H members. The qualitative study could also explore why experiences at State 4-H camp were not higher on the activity list and address ways to increase the idea of tolerance and acceptance at camp. Other options for further study would be to compare and contrast 4-H members verses non-4-H members or other youth development organizations to 4-H, and determine if 4-H shows a stronger impact on the topic of bullying.

This study focused on Georgia 4-H as a youth development organization which positively influenced bullying beliefs and behaviors of participating youth. However, 36% of the participants in this study indicated that they would ignore a bullying situation and 70% agreed or strongly agreed that they would stop a bullying act. If youth believe bullying to be negative, why do they justify ignoring the act and why didn't a larger percentage of participants indicate that they would stop a bullying act? Is there something 4-H leaders could implement to help participants gain confidence in this situation in order to increase the likelihood that they would stop the act? Further research is needed to gain a clearer understanding these alarming percentages.

Additionally, the researchers recommend that similar studies be conducted within youth organizations (FFA, Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of the United States of America, Boys and Girls Club of America, YMCA, etc.) to truly determine the impact(s) of programming on youth's knowledge and perceptions of and beliefs toward bullying. One may postulate that youth programs that instill confidence, leadership skills, a sense of belonging, etc. can have a positive, long-lasting impact on youths' perceptions and beliefs about bullying – future research needs to explore such a position.

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