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## **Are Rural 4-Hers More Connected to Their Communities Than Their Non-4-H Counterparts?**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the research described in this article was to determine if membership in 4-H enhances rural 11th graders' sense of belonging or social connection with their communities. Specifically, the study compared the levels of social connections of 4-Hers with those of their non-4-H counterparts. The results revealed that participation in 4-H programs is an avenue for young people to develop a sense of belonging in their communities. The 4-Hers were more socially connected with their communities than their non-4-H peers. The implications of the results for practice in the field of youth development are discussed.

#### Introduction

The research is convincing that young people's involvement and participation in youth development programs have positive effects on their developmental outcomes; involvement in youth programs and organizations serves as a protective factor against delinquent and risk behavior and promotes educational achievement and civic engagement (Balsano, 2005; Eccles & Barber, 1999; McLaughlin, 2005).

While young people may participate in programs and youth organizations, they do not grow up in these programs but in families, schools, and communities (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003), hence the need for them to be socially connected within these spheres. However, the organizations to which young people belong need to help them in achieving social connections to people in the community. For example, the 4-H organization provides avenues for members to develop a sense of belonging (Kress, 2005), as well as long-term, meaningful, and positive relationships with one another and with non-family adults.

A desirable outcome of youth development efforts is that young people experience social connection (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004), which can be defined as "being a participating member of a community, being intimately involved in at least one lasting relationship with another person" (p. 11). Social connection encompasses young peoples' sense of membership, bonding, rootedness, or belonging in the community in which they reside. Further, social connections are reflected in the individual's ties with families and friends, the degree of commitment and integration in other social networks, and the extent of their involvement and participation in community activities (Cross, 2004).

In the same vein, social connection can be viewed as being characterized by three important elements: social networks, social interaction or ties, and social integration (Oorschot, Arts, & Glissen, 2006). Social networks refer to the links an individual has with other members of the local community; social interactions refer to the extent or quality of social relationships that exists between an individual and other members of the community; and social integration refers to the extent to which adolescents are socially embedded into their communities (Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995).

Social integrations are important for adolescent development. Likewise, adolescents' relation to wider social networks and communities has important influences on their eventual outcomes (Newman, 2004). The participation of adolescents in youth organizations such as 4-H is an important indication of their social integration into the local community. When children are involved in youth organizations (e.g., 4-H) they form relationships through which they can access useful information and other social capital resources that can positively influence their development (Coleman, 1988; Newman, 2004). By participating in these groups, adolescents are able to interact with both adults and peers outside of the family. These adults are often seen as trusted positive role models (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001).

The advantages of social connection cannot be overstated. Connected youth are able to tap into the resources available in their communities; they are more integrated into the community and more "engaged in their communities through volunteerism and service that allows them to actively participate in decisions affecting themselves and their families, schools, workplaces, and communities" (Safrit & Auck, 2003, p. 1). Similarly, connected youth perform better in school, are less likely to drop out of high school, and more likely to attend college (Coleman, 1988; Israel et al, 2001; Israel & Beaulieu, 2004). Good social bonding helps young people to develop trust in self and others (Catalano et al., 2004).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The study reported here was designed to examine the impact of 4-H membership on the social connection of rural 11th grade students. Specifically, the study explored whether 4-Hers have a greater sense of social connection and involvement in their communities than their non-4-H counterparts. The study hypothesized that for each variable of social connection and participation considered, 4-Hers would have higher mean scores than their non-4-H counterparts. The single research question guiding the study was:

What differences exist in the levels of social connections and involvement in the community between 4-Hers and non-4-Hers?

The focus on agricultural science students was due to two reasons: first, this is part of a larger study on rural agricultural science students, and second, rural agricultural science students are more likely to be 4-H members than their other peers due to the obvious traditional link between agriculture and 4-H.

### **Methods**

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#### **Data Description**

The design of the research was an exploratory study in which the targeted population included all 11th grade high school students enrolled in agricultural science programs in rural Indiana. Of the 62 schools eligible to participate in the study, only 13 schools gave absolute permission for the study. Absolute permission implies that the principal of the school gave a written permission and the agricultural science teacher was willing to administer and collect the surveys from the students.

The data for this study come from a total of 118 useable surveys collected from 11th grade students enrolled in agricultural science programs in the 13 participating schools. With regards to the demographic characteristics of the students, 59% were boys, and 41% were girls. About 98% of the participants identified themselves as Caucasians, while the remaining 2% were Latina/o. The mean age of the sample is 16.66 years (S.D=0.54).

Rurality is defined in this study using the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) classification of counties as metropolitan or non-metropolitan. The OMB classification, which is based on population sizes and integration with large cities, defined rural/non-metropolitan counties as a census bureau having no more than 50,000 inhabitants (Ricketts, Johnson-Webb, & Taylor 1998).

#### **Survey Instrument**

The study used students' responses to questions from three sections of a multi-section survey instrument. Prior to use, the instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts in sociology, rural sociology, and youth development to assure content and face validity. The first section of the survey solicited demographic information such as age, race, and gender from the students.

The second part measured students' sense of belonging in their communities using 10 Likert questions adapted from Theodori (2001; 2004) related at a Crobanch alpha level of .94:

- Overall I am attached to the community I live in.
- I feel like I belong in my community.
- The friendships and associations that I have with other people in my community mean a lot to me.
- If the people in my community were planning something, I'd think of it as "we" rather than "they" were doing.
- If I need advice about something I could go to someone in my community.
- I think I agree with most people in my community about what is important in life.
- I feel loyal to the people in my community.

- I like to think of myself as similar to the people who live in my community.
- The future success of my community is very important to me.
- I am interested in knowing what goes on in my community.

In addition, the students were asked to indicate their levels of participation in community activities and in volunteer activities within the communities. (Response categories were 0 = "never, " 1 = "once a year," 2 = "once in six months," 3 = "once every two months," 4 = "once a month," 5 = "once every two weeks," and 6 = "once a week.") Finally, the students were asked about their membership in the 4-H club (responses were coded 1 = "yes" and 2 = "no").

#### **Data Analysis**

Data were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 15.0). Descriptive statistics were used to examine 4-H membership among the students. For each variable considered, differences between 4-Hers and non-4-Hers were analyzed by comparing the mean scores of the two groups. In order to assess the practical significance and importance of the observed mean differences, Cohen's effect sizes (d) were estimated. Cohen's effect size is a measure of standardized difference(s) between two means divided by the pooled standard deviation for both means (Cohen, 1988). In the study, d was calculated by using the effect size calculator available at <a href="http://web.uccs.edu/lbecker/Psy590/escalc3.htm">http://web.uccs.edu/lbecker/Psy590/escalc3.htm</a>. Cohen (1988) defined d values of 0.2 as small, values of 0.5 as medium, and values of 0.8 as large. Using Cohen's definition as a backdrop, the study reported here considered d values as follows:

- < d < 0.2: negligible effect size;
- 0.2 < d < 0.5: small effect size;
- 0.5 < d < 0.8: moderate effect size, and,
- 0.8 < d: strong effect size

#### Results

The results of the descriptive analysis (Table 1) show that there were more non-4-Hers than 4-Hers among the students. Specifically, while about 68% of the students were non-4-Hers, only 32 % were members of 4-H.

**Table 1.** Membership in 4-H (n=118)

	N	Percentage (%)
Yes	37	32.2
No	78	67.8
Decline to answer	3	2.5

Tables 2 and 3 provide the results of the mean differences between 4-Hers and non 4-Hers in terms of social connection to the other members of their communities and involvement in the community, respectively.

**Table 2.** Connection Between 4-Hers and Non-4Hers (n=118)

Variables	4-Hers		Non-4-Hers		d
	M	S.D	M	S.D	
I am very attached to my community	3.08	0.86	2.60	0.92	0.54*
I feel like I belong in my community	3.16	0.73	2.67	0.80	0.64*
Friends in my community mean a lot to me	3.51	0.61	3.12	0.79	0.57*
I can go to someone in my community for advice	3.08	0.64	2.67	0.88	0.53*
I agree with most people in my community	2.86	0.63	2.59	0.83	0.36
I feel loyal to the people in my community	2.86	0.67	2.63	0.76	0.32
I am similar to people living in my community	3.03	0.69	2.43	0.83	0.80**

Note: M = mean; S.D = standard deviation; d = Cohen's effect size; \* = moderate effect size; \*\*= large effect size

**Table 3.**Mean Differences in Participation/Involvement Between 4-Hers and Non-4Hers (n=118)

Variables	4-Hers		Non-4Hers		d
	M	S.D	M	S.D	
I see planned program as "we" not "they"	2.73	0.77	2.43	0.82	0.38
Success of community is important to me	2.78	0.79	2.53	0.85	0.31

Interest in knowing what goes on in community	2.84	0.73	2.74	0.86	0.13
Participation in community activities	4.75	1.80	3.26	2.21	0.74*
Participation in community volunteer activities	4.02	1.99	2.69	1.87	0.70*

Note: M = mean; S.D = standard deviation; d = Cohen's effect size; \*= moderate effect size; \*\*= large effect size

#### **Discussions and Conclusions**

Although 4-Hers had higher mean scores than non-4Hers on all variables, the findings reported in Tables 2 and 3 are interpreted in terms of the effect sizes. Only moderate and large effect sizes are considered of practical importance and significance. The findings of this study revealed the following.

- Only 32% of the sample of rural 11th grade enrolled in agricultural science programs identified themselves as 4-H members.
- 4-H members reported higher levels of social connection (i.e., feelings of belonging, appreciation for friendship, and similarity with others) to people in their communities. This finding is in accord with the reports of Hensley, Place, Jordan, and Israel (2007) that 4-H indeed enhances positive youth development through a sense of belonging and inclusiveness.
- 4-Hers were more likely to report that they find it easy to go to others in their communities for advice when needed. This underscores the importance of their relationships with adult volunteers and educators. It appears that the adults with whom they form these relationships are a trusted source of advice for 4-Hers. As rightly expressed by Israel et al. (2001), young people's participation in organizations (such as the 4-H) provides them with social support from adults who can be trusted to give useful advice. Also, positive bonding with adults helps young people to develop "a capacity for adaptive responses to change and for growth into a healthy and functional adult" (Catalano et al., 2004, p. 102).
- 4-H members have higher levels of participation in community activities than non 4-Hers. The results support the notions of Kress (2005) and Pittman et al. (2003) that an essential and desirable outcome of youth development programs is that young people develop and experience an inclusive atmosphere or supportive environment where they feel welcome and free to be active participants in their own development.

In conclusion, the study reported here provides an insight into the possible differences between members and non-members of Indiana 4-H in terms of social connections. Specifically, the results show that membership in 4-H increases young peoples' social connection, sense of belonging, and participation in their communities. However, because this study is limited to 11th graders in agricultural science programs, the results, though important, may not be generalized to the entire population of 4-H members.

#### **Implications and Recommendation**

The study reported here holds some important implications for research and practice in the field of Youth Development. The findings of this of the study can be used by stakeholders in rural 4-H youth development programs to show that membership in 4-H enhances rural young peoples' sense of belonging and connection in their communities. That is, 4-H promotes positive youth development by encouraging community involvement, sense of belonging, and engagement.

The results of the study can also be used to encourage recruitment and retention of 4-H members and volunteers in rural 4-H programs. Specifically:

- The benefits of membership in 4-H could be communicated to non-members as a way of inviting them into the club.
- The results serve as encouragement to adults who volunteer in the 4-H programs. 4-H volunteers need constant encouragement and assurance that their labors are not in vain and that they are role models and sources of trusted advice for the young people in their care. For some 4-Hers, participating in the 4-H may be their primary source of relationships and supports from non-family adults.
- The results can be used to recruit adult volunteers who are interested in making changes or impacts in the lives of young people.

Given the results of the present study, the following recommendations are made.

- Stakeholders in youth development initiatives should develop strategies that foster positive adolescent-community connection or bonding. As stated by Catalano et al. (2004), these strategies when combined with the development of skills can effectively curb antisocial behaviors in young people.
- Rural communities, especially those interested in increasing young people's participation and
  engagement and those faced with increasing youth outmigration, should invest in youth development
  initiatives that generate a sense of belonging in the youths. Having a sense of belonging and
  commitment to a community can encourage rural youth to stay rather than migrate from their
  communities.

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