

Attitudes Toward Competition In a Youth Organization

Keith L. Smith, Leader, Personnel Development
Ohio Cooperative Extension Service and
Associate Professor, Agricultural Education

Christy Collins, Graduate Student
Agricultural Education
The Ohio State University

Accepted for Publication December 1987

During the last two decades, there has been a growing concern about the effects of competition on youth. This concern has been especially meaningful to professionals who work with youth such as those in 4-H and FFA. Competition has always been a large part of many projects and activities at the local, county, state and national levels. A recent article by Smith and Kahler (1987) supports this concept concerning competition by indicating that the National Future Farmers of America (FFA) Organization has been conducting its contests as a part of the convention program in Kansas City, Missouri, since 1947. They go on to state that these contests have been recognized as worthwhile and educational as evidenced by more than 1,350 national contestants each year representing more than 87,000 state and local participants. Why there is this kind of participation in competitive events has been due, in large part, to the fact that adults generally have believed that youth enjoy participating in activities if they believe they will be successful. Adults base their belief on prior experiences and the actions of those around them.

Other research on competition has indicated that low achievers will avoid a competitive environment (Billing, 1980; Kirteeng, 1965; Parker & Johnson, 1981). These low achievers, as youth professionals in 4-H and FFA know, may be the individuals who benefit most from opportunities provided by 4-H and FFA (Abbott, Sutton, Jackson, & Logan, 1976; Keith & Hoopfer, 1984).

On the other hand, Prvulovich (1982), reporting on competition in the Times Higher Education Supplement, claim, "Those who thought they had done badly tried much harder. Those with an 'average' result tried at least as hard the next time." In addition, "It was those who thought they had done well who put less effort into the repeat performance. Far from discouraging the 'losers,' competition would seem to have its most adverse effect upon those who believe themselves to be excelling."

A study by Kirteeng (1965) indicated that "4-H award winners were more inclined to re-enroll in 4-H." Jeter (1971) and McClure (1971) reported in separate research that those members who re-enrolled enjoy competition more than dropouts and had a better attitude toward competition.

Billing (1980), in a study of direct versus indirect competition, said:

Positive sum conditions (more winners than losers) are highly desirable in an educational context where maximum development of each individual is the goal. Competition is neither inherently good or bad; it is simply one type of human behavior.

With respect to education, it is good if it maximizes the acquisition of knowledge and skills; it is bad if it detracts from learning. If maximum development of all students is desired, direct competition (competition against each other), by its very nature, negates this goal by producing a large proportion of losers.

Since one of the most important goals of 4-H as well as FFA has been to provide educational opportunities for youth, consideration should be given to the impact competition has had on the educational process. As Hunt and Corman (1963) pointed out in their article, "The Tormented Generation," "Some gifted people cannot thrive--cannot even endure--highly competitive atmosphere; they need one that is more cooperative or permissive or intimate."

Many researchers (Scanlan, 1982; Schunk, 1984; Watson, 1983) have proposed that competition can be beneficial and enhance learning if the child, with the help of an adult, sets goals that are challenging yet attainable.

Purpose and Objectives

These concerns about competition, in addition to a high 4-H dropout rate in Ohio, led to this study (Collins, 1986). The goal was to describe and compare attitudes toward competition of current 4-H members versus 4-H dropouts. Comparisons were also done based on preferences toward direct (competition against another) versus indirect (comparison against one's own past performance) competition. Specific research objectives included:

1. To describe the attitudes of current members toward 4-H competition.
2. To describe the attitudes of dropouts toward 4-H competition.
3. To compare the attitudes toward competition of current 4-H members and 4-H dropouts.
4. To describe any differences or similarities between members and dropouts regarding indirect versus direct competition.

Definition of Terms

Attitude. The term as used in this study was the expression of a person, by word or deed, of their reaction toward or feeling about a thing or situation (Hothem, 1968).

Competition. The term as used in this study was the opportunity for 4-H members to compare their achievements in relation to their previous achievement, a standard of excellence, and/or in relation to other 4-H members (National 4-H Awards Task Force, 1983).

Direct Competition. Competition of one person against another. At least one competitor has won an award, top billing, and so forth, for every one who has not.

Dropout. This term referred to those youth between the ages of 8 and 18 who belonged to 4-H at one time, but were not enrolled during the 1985 calendar year.

Indirect Competition. Competition against self-determined goals, present skill and past performance. A benefit of indirect competition has been that there have been more winners than losers.

4-H Member. Youth between the ages of 8 (or in the third grade) and 19 who participated in an organized 4-H club program during the 1985 calendar year (Hothem, 1968).

Limitations and Basic Assumption

One limitation affecting the scope of this study was identified. The population and sample were limited to the accuracy of the county enrollments provided. The following conditions were assumed to be true for the purposes of this study: (a) that competition is/was a part of 4-H, (b) that factors such as race, socioeconomic status and geographic location were similar for both the current members and dropouts, and (c) that the proportion of dropouts in the sample that have moved were representative of the number in the population that have moved.

Procedures

The nature of this study was a pre-experimental design utilizing a modified static-group comparison and ex-post facto (causal-comparison) analyses, as defined by Campbell and Stanley (1963).

Instrument

In order to obtain a means of comparing attitudes toward competition of 4-H members and 4-H dropouts, a survey instrument was used. The instrument combined an attitude scale developed by Hothem (1968) and an index of the strength of indirect and direct competitive attitudes developed by Billing (1980). The instrument as used for this study was examined for content validity by a panel of experts.

Conditions of Testing

The questionnaire was pilot tested in Fairfield County, Ohio. Twenty-eight questionnaires were mailed (14 to members, and 14 to dropouts), and 22 were returned. The internal consistency reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for Part A of the instrument was .84 after nine items were deleted. Part B had a reliability coefficient of .80 after eliminating three items.

The final questionnaire consisted of 25 questions regarding competition and four demographic questions. Participants were asked to respond to Parts A and B of the instrument using a 6-point, Likert-type scale, where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = moderately agree, 4 = moderately disagree, 5 = disagree, and 6 = strongly disagree. The demographic information was completed by filling in their age and years in 4-H, while checking off membership status and gender.

A total of 247 questionnaires (71.8%) were returned out of the 344 questionnaires that were sent (172 to current members and 172 to dropouts). Over 79% of the current members responded compared to 64% of the dropouts. The final usable amount from both current members and dropouts was 73.3% and 59.3%, respectively, for a total usable response rate of 66.3%. Nonresponse error was addressed by double-dipping (Miller & Smith, 1983). No significant differences were found between respondents and nonrespondents at the .05 alpha level using a t-test.

Subject Selection

Two populations were identified for this study: (a) those who were members during the 1985 calendar year, and (b) those who had joined 4-H but left before reaching the maximum age guidelines.

Multistage proportionate random sampling was used to determine the samples. The 88 Ohio counties are divided into five districts, and 3 counties were randomly selected from each of the five districts.

The county extension 4-H agents in the 15 selected counties were contacted by mail and asked to provide a complete list of 4-H member enrollment for 1984 and 1985 with names and addresses. The 1985 list was used to develop a list (frame) of current members and then compared to the 1984 roster to form a list of dropouts.

The sample sizes were calculated using Cochran's (1977) formula to adequately control sampling error. Once these sample sizes were obtained, samples from each county were drawn randomly and in proportion to the number of members or dropouts in that county relative to the total populations.

Data Analysis

Responses to the 6-point, Likert-type scale as previously described were assigned a number from one to six. In Part A, 6 represented those who were most positive toward competition with 1 being the most negative toward competition. Six represented those who enjoy direct competition in Part B, and 1 those who prefer indirect competition. The t-test, chi-square test, and analysis of variance tests at an alpha level of .05 were used to determine if a significant difference existed between the means of the current members and dropouts in their attitudes toward competition or in their preferences toward direct versus indirect competition.

Results

This section includes a description of the total sample, comparisons of means of various combinations of respondents on the basis of attitudes toward competition, and preferences toward direct versus indirect competition.

Description of the Total Sample

As mentioned previously, 228 usable responses were obtained from a sample of 344 identified youth. Of these 228 responses, 126 were current members and 102 were dropouts, with 34% of the respondents being male and 66% being female. Twenty-five percent of the total sample were 8-11 years old, 22.8% were 12-13, 17.2% were 14-15, 15.8% were 16-17, and the remaining 9.2% were 18 years old or older.

In reporting tenure in the 4-H program, respondents (total) indicated that 45.6% had been in 4-H for one to two years. Twenty-one percent had been members for three to four years; 17% were members for five to six years, and 16% were in 4-H for seven years or more.

Description of Respondents Based on Their Attitudes Toward Competition

When the differences of attitudes of current 4-H members versus 4-H dropouts were compared, the dropouts were found to have a significantly more positive attitude toward competition than the members (see Table 1). Both groups tended to have a negative attitude toward competition.

Dropouts may have had more positive attitudes because they are now away from the competition, while the members are still involved. Another alternative reason is that adequate competitive situations were not provided for some of these dropouts.

Table 1
Attitudes Toward Competition Comparing 4-H Members and Dropouts

Membership Status	<u>f</u>	Mean	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>
Members	126	2.72	.60	
Dropouts	102	2.95	.68	-2.72*
Total	228	2.83		

Note. Mean based on 6-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = strong negative attitude toward competition and 6 = strong positive attitude toward competition.

*p<.05.

The gender, age, and number of years the respondents were in the 4-H program had no significant effect on their attitudes toward competition, although those who had been members one to two years had the most positive attitude, while those in 4-H for seven years or more had the lowest attitude scores.

Nearly 66% of the respondents of this study were female and 34% were male. Although the differences in attitude of these two groups were found to be nonsignificant, males were identified as having a higher mean (2.92) than females (2.78).

Age was not found to be significant, although older youth tended to have lower means, indicating a tendency for a more negative attitude toward competition. All age groups were shown to have means less than 3, except males 12-13 (3.01), indicating a more negative than positive attitude toward competition.

When boys of different ages were compared to each other based on their attitudes toward competition, no significant differences were found. No significant differences were identified between girls of differing ages on the basis of their attitudes toward competition. The trend was for attitudes to become more negative toward competition as the girls became older.

A significant difference between members and dropouts was identified in reference to direct versus indirect competition. Dropouts had a mean that was significantly higher than the mean of the members. Therefore, dropouts preferred direct competition more than members did, although ultimately, based on the means reported by each group, both tended to prefer indirect competition (see Table 2).

Table 2

Attitudes of 4-H Members and Dropouts Toward Direct Versus Indirect Competition

Membership Status	<u>f</u>	Mean	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>
Members	126	2.71	.73	
Dropouts	102	2.93	.84	-2.72*
Total	228	2.81		

Note. Mean based on 6-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = strong preference for indirect competition and 6 = strong preference for direct competition.

*p<.05.

Females were found to have a significantly higher preference for indirect competition than the males. The mean for males was 3.00, with 2.71 being the mean for females.

When comparing different age groups on their preferences toward direct versus indirect competition, no significant differences were found. Older youth, however, as indicated by their means, tended to prefer indirect competition more strongly than younger youth.

No significant differences were found when comparing various groups by the number of years they were in 4-H. The tendency was for youth with longer tenure in 4-H to prefer indirect competition.

In comparing attitudes of boys of different ages toward direct or indirect competition, significant differences were not found. Females, in general, preferred indirect competition. With the exception of members 12-13 (3.08), all females had means below 3.00. Significant differences were not found between age groups for females.

Relationships Between Variables

Combining variables such as gender and age, membership status and gender, membership status and age, in addition to membership status and years in 4-H, was not very enlightening. Combinations involving males and/or dropouts had consistently higher means than other categories.

Using a Maximum R-Square Improvement for Dependent Variables, various combinations of variables were examined. When Part A of the study (attitude toward competition) was viewed as a dependent variable, all combinations of independent variables (gender, age, years in 4-H and membership status) were found to be significantly at the 0.0027 level, with four degrees of freedom. The most significant single variable was membership status with a 0.007 probability (see Table 3).

Table 3

Maximum R-Square Improvement for the Dependent Variable Attitudes Toward Competition

Model	Variable(s)	<u>R</u>	<u>R</u> ²	<u>F</u>
Best One Variable	Membership Status	.1780	.0317	7.40*
Best Two Variables	Age Membership Status	.2322	.0539	6.42*
Best Three Variables	Age Gender Membership Status	.2630	.0692	5.55*
Best Four Variables	Years Age Gender Membership Status	.2647	.0701	4.20*

* $p < .05$.

For Part B of the questionnaire (preference toward direct versus indirect competition), the interaction of all four variables provided a probability of 0.0004. The most significant single variable was gender, with a 0.0069 probability.

A correlation of .63 was found between Part A and Part B of the instrument, which indicated that as the attitude of an individual toward competition became more positive, preference toward direct competition increased, or as attitude toward competition became more negative, preference toward indirect competition increased.

Conclusions

Several important conclusions were drawn from the results of this study. Dropouts had a significantly more positive attitude toward 4-H competition than did members. Males and females did not differ significantly in their attitude toward competition. No significant differences existed between the different age groups in their attitudes toward competition. The number of years a respondent was in 4-H was not significant in their attitudes toward competition. As girls got older, their attitudes became more negative toward competition.

All groups were more negative than positive toward competition. Indirect competition was preferred significantly more by members than dropouts. Females preferred indirect competition significantly more than males. No significant differences existed with the variable age in preferences toward direct versus indirect competition. No significant difference existed between groups based on tenure of the respondents. All age groups of boys preferred indirect competition. No significant

differences existed between groups. No significant differences existed between girls of different ages. All preferred indirect competition. All groups preferred indirect competition over direct competition.

Recommendations

It is recommended that when the county program or school curriculum is reviewed that the program be scrutinized more closely. Are 4-H members strongly encouraged to compete or to participate in direct competition? Perhaps members should be allowed to choose if they wish to participate in competition, and what type of competition they prefer. All groups in this study tended to prefer indirect competition.

Do instructors emphasize other aspects of their program or is competition the carrot? The study does not indicate that competitive experiences should be eliminated from 4-H. The realization, however, is that many youth benefit from, and have a positive attitude toward, competition, but competition is not the answer for all students/members.

4-H members should not be pressured to compete, since our study shows that there tended to be negative attitudes toward competition. Youth can become frustrated and give up if forced into competition.

Implications for Further Research

Research should be conducted to determine changes in competitive attitudes of 4-H (and FFA) members before and after a competitive situation. This would help determine if the results of the competition determine the attitude the member adopts toward competition.

Research should be done to determine the effectiveness of various recognition systems in 4-H (and FFA), to determine the most appropriate one(s). Direct and indirect competitive situations should be compared.

Another study similar to Hothem's (1968) should be conducted to see how parents, advisors, and members' attitudes toward competition compare in the 4-H (and FFA) program today. Identification of the source of the competitive push in 4-H and FFA would be helpful in planning future programs.

More work should be done relating to the interactions of gender, years in the program, and age of the youth. Perhaps this would be most effective if only members were studied, to obtain a more straightforward look at the attitudes of members and their preferences relating to competition.

References

- Abbott, R., Sutton, B., Jackson, M. C., Jr., & Logan, B. W. (1976, October). Process and impact evaluation: The Detroit 4-H program, final report. East Lansing: Michigan State University, College of Urban Development, Center for Urban Affairs.
- Billing, J. (1980). Direct versus indirect competition. Unpublished master's thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
- Campbell, D. T., & Stanley, J. C. (1963). Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Cochran, W. G. (1977). Sampling techniques. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Collins, C. (1986). A comparison of attitudes toward competition in Ohio 4-H members vs. 4-H dropouts. Unpublished master's thesis, The Ohio State University, Columbus.

- Hothem, G. W. (1968). Attitudes toward competition in the 4-H program in Carroll County, Ohio. Unpublished master's thesis, The Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Hunt, M. M., & Corman, R. (1963). The tormented generation. Saturday Evening Post, 35.
- Jeter, R. N. (1971). Factors related to 4-H membership status and selected characteristics of ninth grade girls in Blount County, Tennessee. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
- Keith, J., & Hoopfer, L. (1984). Michigan early adolescent survey: Final report. East Lansing: Michigan State University.
- Kirteeng, A. E. (1965). Relationship of 4-H award winning to selected personal characteristics of 4-H members. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- McClure, J. P. (1971). Factors related to 4-H membership status of ninth and tenth grade boys in Greene County, Tennessee. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
- Miller, L., & Smith, K. (1983, September-October). Handling nonresponse issues. Journal of Extension, 14, 45.
- National 4-H Awards Task Force. (1983). A model for recognizing 4-Hers. Washington, DC: Author.
- National 4-H Council. (1982). 1982 national 4-H awards program study survey results. Washington, DC: Author.
- Ohio Extension Research Needs Committee. (1983, October). Unpublished report. Columbus: Author.
- Oliveri, C. (1985). Report to the Ohio 4-H Foundation. Unpublished report. Columbus: Author.
- Parker, J. E., & Johnson, C. E. (1981). Affecting achievement motivation. University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
- Prvulovich, Z. R. (1982). In defence of competition. Journal of Philosophy of Education, 16(1), 77-78.
- Scanlan, T. K. (1982, March). Motivation and stress in competitive youth sports. Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance, 53(3), 27-28, 36.
- Schunk, D. H. (1984). Children's social comparison and goal setting in achievement contexts. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.
- Smith, W. M., & Kahler, A. A. (1987, Summer). Needed: Educational objectives and administrative criteria for the national FFA contests. The Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture, 28(2), 45-50.
- Watson, C. (1983, August). Motivational effects of feedback and goal-setting on group performance. Paper delivered at the American Psychological Association Convention, Anaheim, CA.