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Female Leadership Among Rural Adolescents  
John C. Ricketts, Edward W. Osborne and Rick D. Rudd

### **Female Leadership Among Rural Adolescents**

#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this mixed methods investigation was to explain the prominence of females in leadership roles in a rural Florida youth leadership program. A conceptual framework of leadership emergence in local leadership development programs was used to guide the study, but it did not limit the emergence of new themes. Six schools, 17 female leaders, six instructors, and nine parents participated in the qualitative portion of the study. A significant piece of the theoretical framework was McClelland's motivational needs theory. A motivation instrument adapted from Turner (1996) was used to evaluate the needs of junior and senior students ( $n = 41$ ) at each of the schools to try and further explain the phenomenon of female leadership prominence. The findings suggest that females are more active in career development events, officer positions, and other leadership development activities. The emergent themes for describing and understanding female leadership prominence were: *willing workers, achievement, sports, family, power, age, affiliation, teacher, comfort zone, and curriculum*. The quantitative data suggested that males and females high a strong need for achievement, and indicated females had a significantly greater need for power than the males. Recommendations for practice and further research are also presented.

#### **Introduction**

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Nationwide there are 457,278 Future Farmers of America (FFA) members of which 35% are female (National FFA Organization [NFO], 2002). The National FFA Organization reports that females hold 47% of state leadership positions in the FFA, but it seems that female members are assuming more leadership positions in the organization than ever. Females now have a strong presence at the National FFA officer level, as well as at the state level in Florida. Of the eight 2001-2002 State FFA officers in Florida, there is only one male member. According to National FFA statistics, there are currently more male members in FFA than females, but anecdotal evidence suggests that female FFA members are taking a stronger leadership role in the organization (NFO, 2002). "What was once the bastion of adolescent males appears to have evolved to a preponderance of female students taking over the reins of leadership" (Morris, 1991). Zielinski (1999) agrees that females have established themselves as a majority presence in student activities as a whole. This trend seems to be showing itself in local chapters as well. This study used a variety of data collection and analysis procedures to gain a phenomenological understanding of the emergence of female leaders in the Florida FFA Association. The study also proposed a theoretical representation of the phenomena in hopes of explaining the apparent trend toward majority female leadership in the FFA.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A number of studies were reviewed to examine the ostensible prominence of females in the FFA leadership roles. According to Lyons, Saltonstall, and Hammer (1989), research on the leadership of female adolescents has been virtually non-existent. However, the research team for this project identified several studies useful in shaping the initial theoretical framework for the study. Seevers and Dormody (1994) developed a measure of Youth Leadership Life Skills and found that gender was a significant predictor of leadership, with females showing more leadership skill than males. Other studies concerned with adolescent females in leadership activities, needs of female leaders, characteristics of female leaders, and gender leadership differences, were included in the preliminary theoretical framework for the study. As depicted in the conceptual model shown in Figure 1, family, FFA, school, self, community, instructor, and agriculture program are the key variables that theoretically explain the emergence of leadership in the FFA. In this study the focus was on gender and the need for achievement, affiliation, and power, but the influence of the family, teacher, FFA, and school variables were also considered.

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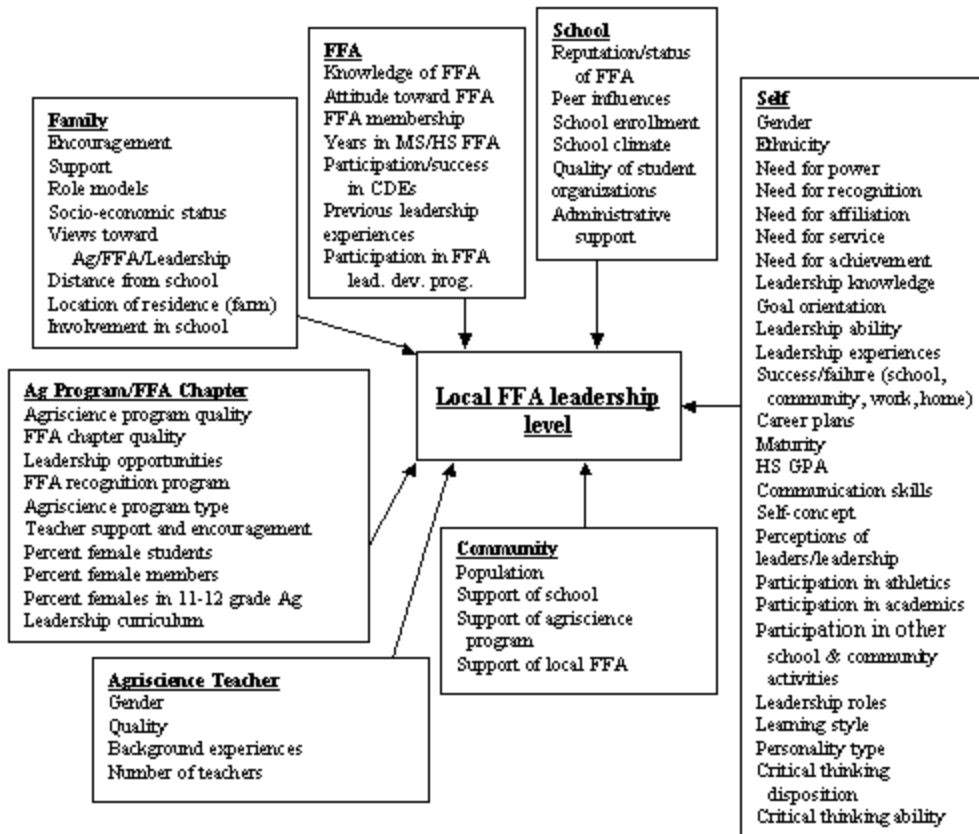


Figure 1. Conceptual model of factors affecting the emergence of leaders in local FFA chapters.

According to Zielinski (1999), "Females have established themselves as a majority presence in student activities..." (p.29). Biernat and Kleese (1989) found that women participated more than men in all activities, except athletics and hobby clubs. The Trump (1944) study evaluated 3,581 students from 901 high schools in 20 states and found that females participated more than males in high school activities when they participated in 2-12 or more activities. Bourgon (1967) surveyed 740 students and found that girls out-participated boys by a margin of two to one.

A variety of other studies have examined female youth leadership more intensively by evaluating the influence of achievement, sociability, control, and other variables. According to Morris (1991) "The changing nature of gender roles in combination with girls' greater identification with success in school, may account for the over-representation of girls among adolescent leaders" (p. 726). Bourgon (1967) tried to attribute the phenomenon or "over-representation" to grades. He found that students who had the most impressive grades were involved in more activities, but other research has shown that, in general, females do better in reading and writing, and that males do better in science and math (Bae, Y. et. al, 2000; Coley, 2001).

Zielinski (1999) discovered that adolescent females were attracted to social activities more

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than males. One year earlier, Kazcur (1998) found that females emerged as leaders of socially oriented groups regardless of the groups' traditional gender orientation. Ten years earlier in a state-wide Illinois study, Buser and Humm (1980) concluded that females have a greater level of participation in organizations of a social nature. These studies contributed to the developing literature in human motivation and needs, which describes the constructs of affiliation, achievement, and power as they pertain to youth leadership (Rohs and Anderson, 2001; Turner and Herren, 1997).

The qualitative and quantitative aspects of this study were grounded in the motivation theory developed by McClelland (1961). McClelland's study identified three types of motivational needs: achievement, affiliation, power. According to Rohs and Anderson (2001) and Turner and Herren (1997), females in agricultural education possess a greater need for power and affiliation than males. Other studies from outside the agricultural education discipline support these findings. According to Zielinski (1999), adolescent females were concerned with the "welfare of others and the harmony of the group" (p. 65). Moss and Qetler (1995), concluded that females tend to lead with a collaborative, developmental, and relationship-oriented style.

Helgeson (1990) found that women led by relationship building, information sharing, and inclusion of others. Denmark (1977) believed that females focused on human relations skills in order to get ahead. Shumacher and Swan (1993) agreed with Denmark in finding that female students strongly favored a "humanistic" style of leadership. In a study by McKinley, Birkenholz, and Stewart (1992), female students perceived themselves to have greater interpersonal relations skills than males. Females believed they were more flexible, considerate, sensitive, understanding, trustworthy, tactful, respectful, cordial, and empathetic; better listeners; more interested in others, better able to resolve conflicts and develop positive co-worker relationships; and show a greater sense of humor.

Moss and Jensrud (1995) looked at vocational administrative leaders, and found that females ranked significantly higher on 17 of the 37 attributes of the Leader Attributes Inventory (LAI). The 17 attributes included energy and stamina, achievement orientation, initiative, persistence, enthusiasm and optimism, dependability and reliability, commitment to the common good, personal integrity, ethics, communication, sensitivity and respect, ability to motivate others, conflict management, appropriate use of leadership styles, ideological beliefs appropriate to the group, decision making, and information management.

Bynum (2001) studied females and discovered that they were more of a team player; more nurturing; more willing to mentor; and better at networking, listening, and persistence than males. Woolfolk (1995) found that females define themselves in relation to others, while males define themselves as separate from others. This realization is backed by Eagly and Johnson (1990), who found that females utilized a more democratic or participative style of leadership than men.

According to Moss and Jensrud (1995), many researchers believe that there is no gender difference in the leadership behavior of males and females. Regardless, Denmark (1977) summed it up by stating, "gender leadership differences..." are either "emphasized or eradicated depending upon the attitude of the organization in which the leader serves" (Zielinski, p. 69).

### **Purpose/Objectives**

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The purpose of this mixed methods investigation was to explain the prominence of females in leadership roles in FFA. More specifically this study sought understanding of the phenomenon as perceived by students, parents, and agriculture teachers. The objectives of this study were to:

1. Describe the leadership status of females in rural leadership development programs in Florida.
2. Explain female leadership prominence or lack thereof as perceived by outstanding female leaders, their parents, and their teacher; and
3. Determine the motivational needs of junior and senior male and female high school students in at selected schools.

### **Methodology**

In this study the researchers employed qualitative and quantitative methods to understand and explain the leadership prominence of females in the FFA. The epistemology that guided the study was that of constructivism, which claims "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). The theoretical perspective or philosophy behind the methodology was symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Phenomenological research (Schutz, 1967) was used to understand the roles of females in the FFA organization as well as the phenomenon of female leadership prominence.

This study's population consisted of high school students enrolled in agriscience programs in Florida, along with their parents and teachers. The agriscience teacher in each of six purposively selected schools was asked to identify two to three of the most outstanding female leaders in the respective local FFA chapter. A total of 17 outstanding female leaders participated in the study. These leaders were also asked to deliver an open-ended questionnaire to one of their parents, and nine parents provided data for the study. In addition, the teachers at the six selected schools were interviewed, and 41 junior and senior students enrolled in agriculture classes at these schools completed a questionnaire as a fourth data source. The six schools were purposively selected based on the following criteria:

1. one agriculture teacher in the agriculture department
2. rural community with a population of less than 2,500
3. equal representation of male and female teachers from three different FFA Areas in Florida; and
4. an agriculture program recognized as a "quality program" by State Staff in Florida.

The qualitative portion of the study utilized interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questionnaires to determine the leadership roles of females in the FFA, understand female leadership prominence, and explain the female leadership phenomenon. The focus groups consisted of outstanding female leaders as identified by their teachers. The interviews and the focus groups used semi-structured (Shank, 2002) questions in order to acquire richness of data, while staying on task. Teacher interviews were conducted without the students present, and student focus groups were conducted without the presence of the teacher. The interviews and focus groups, which served as the primary data source, were audiotaped and transcribed. Additional data such as field notes, reflective journal entries, and letters of support provided by some principals at participating schools were also analyzed. The parental surveys contained six questions pertaining to their daughter's leadership activities in the FFA.

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A quantitative segment of the study was added to further explain the phenomenon of prominent female leadership, to validate the qualitative findings, and to test part of the conceptual model that was used to design the study. Quantitative data collection procedures included a student questionnaire developed by the researchers. Part of the questionnaire included a test developed by Turner (1996) to measure motivational needs of power, affiliation, and achievement. The questionnaire also included a researcher-developed self-perception scale and items designed to collect demographic information. A five point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) was used with each response item. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the scale. Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .84$ ) for the complete motivation instrument and for each of the constructs, achievement ( $\alpha = .74$ ), power ( $\alpha = .86$ ), and affiliation ( $\alpha = .61$ ) had acceptable internal consistency.

### *Analysis of Data*

The qualitative data were analyzed by listening to the audio-tapes, reading the transcripts, developing codes, combining codes into themes, and denoting the frequency of conversation concerning each of the themes. The conceptual model representing the emergence of local FFA leadership served as guide to the coding process but was not used as a benchmark for the purposes of new theme emergence and negated biases on the part of the research team. In determining the status of female FFA leadership and in understanding the reasons for their prominence, themes were analyzed, confirmed, or disconfirmed (Miles and Huberman, 1984) by measures of frequency across teachers, parents, and students. The validity of the qualitative data was achieved by triangulation of data collection methods, multiple sources, and multiple investigators (Glesne, 1999).

The quantitative data, which were used to statistically describe the motivation of junior and senior students in the agriscience programs where the interviews and focus groups were conducted, were analyzed using SPSS for Windows version 10. Frequencies, means, standard deviations, and t-tests were used to further explore the findings. However, the validity of the inferential test results is uncertain, given the lack of randomization in the study and the small sample sizes. Descriptive statistics were used to report on the motivational needs of achievement, power, and affiliation, and t-tests were used to examine motivational differences among males and females.

## **Results**

### *Objective One*

Objective one sought to describe the leadership status of females in rural FFA programs in Florida. Based on the interviews and the focus groups, teachers and students clearly feel that their chapters are predominately led by females. Two of the schools had all female officer teams; two of the selected schools had FFA officer teams with a strong majority of females; one school was half male and half female; and another was predominately male. In the school that had a mostly male officer team, the teacher admitted that her stronger leaders were the "young ladies." When asked if the females took a more active role in leadership, she responded:

Most definitely; they're not afraid. We use the phrase here, 'stepping out of the box,' and the young ladies are not afraid to step out of the box. Some of my young men are... they don't want to step out of the box.

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Studies have found that FFA activities influence youth leadership development (Brannon, Holley, and Key, 1989; Townsend and Carter, 1983; Ricketts, 1982). Aside from forestry and tractor driving career development events (CDEs), the females interviewed were ubiquitous in the remainder of the Florida FFA events, especially in parliamentary procedure and public speaking. Table 1 displays the frequency of responses to the question concerning which FFA events were attended by gender.

Table 1  
*Perceptions of CDE Participation*

CDE	Male	Female	CDE	Male	Female
Livestock	4	2	Horticulture	0	3
Forestry	2	1	Vegetable	0	3
Tractor Driving	6	1	Parliamentary Procedure	1	9
Ag. Mechanics	1	2	Public Speaking	0	8
Ag. Business/Sales and Serv.	0	3	Dairy/Horse	0	2

Chapter officer leadership and CDEs were not the only areas where females were taking the lead. Teachers and students also indicated that females were more active in Supervised Agricultural Experience Programs (SAEs), submitting State FFA degree applications, organizing school-wide leadership conferences, and recruiting FFA members. According to one teacher, females in his FFA chapter "are not shy; they are outspoken, they are go-getters, you know. If they decide to do something, they will go out and recruit their own team among our members."

### *Objective 2*

The next objective sought to explain female leadership prominence, or lack thereof, as perceived by outstanding female leaders, their parents, and the agriculture teachers. Table 2 is a summary of the themes and corresponding frequencies of those themes.

Table 2  
*Themes and Codes Frequency Table*

Theme	Female Teacher	Male Teacher	Female Students	Parents	Totals	Rank
<i>Willing Workers</i>	16	11	90	16	133	1
Achievement	20	9	66	12	107	2
Extra-curricular (Sports)	16	19	20		55	3
Family	8	9	25	12	54	4
Power	8	1	21	21	51	5
Age	11	8	26		45	6
Affiliation	8	2	22	1	33	7
Teacher	6	4	12	3	25	8
<i>Comfort Zone</i>	15	1	8		24	9
Curriculum	1	11	8		20	10

Note: The italicized themes were not included in the conceptual model of Factors Affecting the Emergence of Leaders in Local FFA Chapters.

After recombining the primary codes, the *Willing Workers* theme emerged as the top ranked theme of the participants. This theme is a result of coded conversations dealing with the drive

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and desire, responsibility, commitment, dependability, willingness, participation, decisiveness, organization, and initiative of female leaders. The female participants were more willing to work around and sacrifice the things (work, sports, friends, etc...) that male FFA members were said to use as excuses. The following statement from one of the student participants is representative of all of the female leaders interviewed:

Cause I cheer, I play basketball, I do track, I do everything else, but I spend a lot of time in the FFA and I go home and I have tons of homework and I don't go to bed until 2:00 in the morning, but I choose to do all of this and I am if I am going to be in the FFA I am going to do the best I can do. I guess you have to make sacrifices and the boys aren't willing to make sacrifices.

The desire to be the best in school, FFA activities, and other extra-curricular activities was discussed extensively in the interviews. The achievement theme also represents dialogue concerning the goal orientation of female leaders in all aspects of their lives. The determined desire to achieve exhibited by the competitive young leaders was supported by the teacher interviews and the parent surveys.

Extracurricular activities, more specifically sports, were a major topic of discussion with the teachers and the students. Whether during the competitive season or at other times, teacher and student participants noted that sports have taken over the majority of male students' time, commitment, dedication, and FFA participation. Reasons for the domineering nature of sports included pressure from parents, pressure from the community, more interest on the part of the male students, more prestige, and the yearlong design of the sports programs. Females played sports too, but for some reason they were able to remain in leadership positions in the FFA. Other activities adding to the repertoire of choices the participants had to make about being a leader were chorus, drama, band, journalism, and the student government association.

Family support, especially parental support, was an apparent factor influencing the leadership development of the female leaders. Whether the parents were encouraging the girls emotionally or giving them a ride to parliamentary procedure practice, their support helped elevate their daughter's leadership level. Findings suggested that the family factor might also have an adverse effect when parents discourage FFA participation in lieu of other activities, such as sports or work.

Female leaders seldom admitted to their use or enjoyment of power, but careful coding of the transcripts indicated that these students were very power-oriented in leading their respective FFA chapters. The results of the quantitative data, which supported the emergence of the power theme, are reported later. The female leaders did not seem to look for the power situations, but they were very capable of taking charge when they felt it necessary. One of the participants explained,

The girls...step up and take charge because we've been taught that. The guys are so relaxed and everything that they just think that well since the girls are there they can just do it and we can just sit back and take all the credit for it. In my opinion I think the guys should just get off their rear end and sit up and take charge just like the rest of us. Cause its not fair for most of us girls to have to take charge and do it our way instead and then they look down on us cause we've done it our way for so long, and then they're not doing nothing.

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Age was an interesting theme that emerged that was not part of the conceptual model used in the study. Basically, students and teachers both indicated that many of their leaders were newer FFA members, and not necessarily upperclassmen. One of the teachers described how he recruited ninth graders for parliamentary procedure and public speaking because "that's where you pull out a little bit more of your leadership..." The gender imbalance did not seem to exist with the ninth and tenth graders. Many of the participants spoke of ninth or tenth grade students that were active FFA members and potential leaders of the chapter. Teachers articulated accounts of talented young men who suddenly disappeared when they got their first car or chance to play varsity athletics. The majority of the participants believed that the answer to increasing the number of males in leadership programs was to start recruiting male members and training them for leadership early in their educational career.

Although affiliation was discussed less than the other motivational needs, it was a very prominent topic of discussion by the participants. Several participants believed that males wanted to affiliate with their small familiar group, while females were much more open to meeting all types of people. Even though the transcripts and field notes indicated the social nature of the females, the parents' did not indicate that affiliation was a factor in explaining their daughters' leadership ability.

According to the female leaders and some of the parents, the teacher was a very influential force in the development of leadership, but not necessarily the phenomenon of female leadership prominence. Teacher gender was a variable that the research team assumed would influence the phenomenon, but this was not confirmed in the interviews. The evidence did not indicate that their teachers encouraged females more than males, but teachers did express a tendency to rely on females more because of their willingness to work, compete, and cooperate.

The participants seemed to believe that male students just could not get out of their comfort zone. Males were said to avoid traveling to leadership workshops, competing in contests, or attending FFA-sponsored barn dances. Many participants were frustrated because they felt that the male FFA members simply would not attempt to get involved. A female teacher in the study offered the following explanation:

A lot of my gentlemen are good 'ole country kids and they are used to things right here in [community]. Getting up and going to school in the mornings and playing football and doing a little bit of FFA things, hunting on the weekends and if you try to say ok let's go Friday and Saturday to [the university leadership workshop] they don't care a thing about leaving [community].

Some of the teachers felt like the trend towards agriscience instead of production agriculture and the emphasis on technology were reasons for the trend of leadership prominence of females in the FFA. A male teacher who had the most equal representation of male and female leaders felt like today's students were being deprived of fundamental, production-oriented types of learning opportunities. He understood the value of agriscience, agribusiness, and getting away from "cows, sows, and plows," but felt like it has gone too far. Students from a different school confirmed his assumptions as they explained males' frustration with the short classes.

See they try to teach you in these ag classes. They try to give you a little bit of knowledge about agriculture and I think these classes are supposed to kind of influence you to get in FFA,

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but the type of classes that we have are so large you can't go to the fields and do your garden and stuff, and you can't go in the back and weld and do engines in the tractor and stuff, so I think people [males] get so frustrated inside these classes that they can't really get hands on activities to really want to join.

### Objective 3

The motivation instrument adapted from Rohs and Anderson (2001) and Turner and Herren (1997) was used to determine the motivational needs of high school students in agricultural education programs at selected schools. Part one of the instrument contained 15 items that examined the need for achievement, the need for affiliation, and the need for power. Descriptive statistics for the quantitative data are shown in Table 3.

Statistically, all agricultural education students (N=41) had the highest need for achievement (M = 4.00, SD = .65) followed by power (M = 3.55, SD = .92) and then affiliation (M = 3.31, SD = .72). Males (M = 4.08, SD = .55) and females (M = 3.93, SD = .74) had a high need for achievement. This finding was very similar to the Rohs and Anderson (2001) study. A strong need for affiliation was not found for males or females. The largest mean difference in males and females was in the need for power. Females (M = 3.88, SD = .76) had a significantly ( $p > .017$ ) greater need for power than the males (M = 3.2, SD = .96).

Table 3  
] Mean and Standard Deviation of Motivational Needs by Gender

Gender		Achievement	Power	Affiliation
Male (n = 20)	Mean	4.08	<b>3.20</b>	3.21
	Std. Deviation	.55	.96	.85
Female (n = 21)	Mean	3.93	<b>3.88</b>	3.40
	Std. Deviation	.74	.76	.57
Total (N= 41)	Mean	4.00	3.55	3.31
	Std. Deviation	.65	.92	.72

Note. There was a significant difference ( $p > .017$ ) between males and females in the need for power. □

### Conclusions

Females are predominately represented at the chapter officer level, but even more so in FFA activities. It is unclear whether females in rural FFA programs are taking over the reigns of leadership or if the males are handing them the reigns. Males are well represented in the agriscience classes and on the membership roster, but not at practices, events, and trips that require extra work and time.

An understanding of the lower relative participation of males is represented by themes that emerged from the parents, female leaders, and agriscience teachers. The hard work and dependability of the females was apparent to all the participants of the study and also to the research team. Combining work ethic with the females' need for achievement makes for a driven individual, which may account for the female leadership prominence phenomenon.

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Among the three motivational needs, the achievement mean score was the highest for both males and females. Both male and female FFA members possess a strong need for achievement. Quantitative and qualitative data also indicated that females have a higher need for power than males, even though most of the female participants denied the need for power in the dialogical sessions. The authoritarian attitude might be a major reason for the absence of males in leadership positions and activities. Neither males nor females have a strong need for affiliation.

Males are able to fulfill their achievement and affiliation needs through extracurricular activities such as football, baseball, basketball, or wrestling. The inordinate amount of practice time, the pressure, and "the fame" of participating in sporting events seems to reduce the desire of males to participate and exhibit leadership in the FFA. Football programs in many of the schools where the study was conducted provided school time for athletes to practice and lift weights, making it an intra-curricular activity, just like the FFA with agriscience programs. In contrast, females view the FFA as a viable source of their power and achievement needs, even though they are active in sports and other school activities.

This study confirmed the assumption that the family and teacher affect leadership. Teachers are not encouraging one gender more than the other to become involved in FFA leadership activities. As parents and teachers encourage students to accept leadership roles, female FFA members tend to accept greater leadership roles, and vice versa.

Curriculum changes in recent years toward more agriscience instruction and less production agriculture has led to greater involvement of females in FFA leadership activities. This shift has led to less male participation in CDEs and other leadership opportunities as well.

The participants felt that male students were just not able to "step out of the box," but female students were capable of stepping out. Female FFA members are more comfortable in diverse settings with diverse people, while male members are more comfortable in familiar settings doing familiar activities.

### **Recommendations**

Based upon the results of the study the following recommendations for practice are offered:

1. Teachers need to involve male and female students in leadership activities in the middle school and early high school years. They should plan and implement strategies for retaining students, as sports, work, and other factors become options in their lives.
2. Teachers should be assisted in developing ways to achieve more balanced gender participation, especially when females have become clearly established in chapter leadership positions.
3. Teachers should be assisted in identifying positive ways to address the strong desire of females to lead others, and at the same time develop the desire and capacity for leadership in all students.

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