Who Participates in Voluntary Action?

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Who would you say are the most active participants in voluntary action programs in your community? The authors examine the WHO portion of that question and present data indicating middle- or higher-income status individuals in the middle of their life cycle with adequate personal health, extensive informal interpersonal relationships, and who are exposed to mass media as those likely to join voluntary associations and action programs. Is this true in your community? Having this type of knowledge and information should give you clues on how you can more effectively reach and recruit more volunteers.

Social background or demographic factors answer the question: *Who* participates in voluntary action? Attitudes, personality traits, capacities, social structural and contextual factors answer the question: *Why* do people participate in voluntary action? When we speak of "voluntary action" we're referring both to joining or being a member in a voluntary association as well as to actively participating in the voluntary group once a member.

Knowledge of "who participates" and "why they participate" can be a valuable asset in making programs more effective, in recruiting new members or volunteers, in choosing members or volunteers for special responsibilities or offices, etc.

While the social research *does* provide solid answers to the "who" and "why" questions about membership and participation in voluntary action, other questions remain. Although we know that there are *some* differences between the reasons for *joining* and the reasons for *actively participating* in voluntary groups, more research is required before we adequately know *what* these differences are. Thus, both major kinds of participation are treated together here.

More research must be done before we'll know the *relative* im-

portance of the various predictive factors either in general (that is, virtually all voluntary groups) or for specific types of groups (for example, youth groups).

Life Cycle Stage

This is the first major kind of demographic factor associated significantly with participation in voluntary action. Life cycle stage is actually a complex of more specific factors such as age, marital status, number of children, and the ages of children.

Voluntary action varies markedly for individuals over their life cycle. Participation increases from zero initially to relatively high rates during adolescence in youth, religious, and school-based or school-oriented associations. There is then a general decline in membership and participation of all kinds as the individual first assumes adult patterns of behavior by leaving school, entering the job market, getting married, and beginning a family.

Once these major adjustments have been accomplished, however, the individual is likely to again increase his voluntary participation gradually through the life cycle before retirement, reaching a peak in the middle part of the life cycle when he's in his forties and fifties, is married, and has a number of school-age children. In the latter stages of the life cycle, before retirement, participation gradually declines again.

Then, in post-retirement years, participation generally falls to a low or even zero level. These are, however, only *trends*. Naturally, exceptions at every life cycle stage exist.

This means that participation in formal voluntary associations begins after about 7 years of age, increases throughout the school years, declines in the later teens and early twenties, and then gradually increases again to a peak in the 40- to 55-year age range. Participation gradually declines after this peak in middle age, with often a sharp break toward lower participation after retiring around age 62-65. The physical problems that accompany old age tend to preclude active voluntary participation for most people over 70.

Other things equal, married people are proportionately more involved in voluntary action than single, widowed, or divorced/separated people. The main exception to this generalization is that in the late teens and twenties, the single person has fewer responsibilities and demands on his time and may participate a bit more than his married counterpart. But over most portions of the life cycle (once marrying age has been reached), the married person is more closely tied to social relationships and organizations of various kinds that are conducive to voluntary participation.

Participation in voluntary action generally increases with the number of children one has. Children apparently draw or push parents into various kinds of voluntary

groups and programs. Sometimes this occurs so the children become involved in activities they enjoy (4-H, Scouts); sometimes it's a matter of the parent getting away from the family and children for a while.

The children's ages have more of an impact on the amount of the wife's participation than on the husband's activity, especially when all of a family's children are preschool age. Rates of individual participation are commonly higher when at least one child is school aged, and the rates rise still higher when all children are school aged. Then, general participation levels of the parents decline as their children approach and pass the age of 18, partly because children often leave home around this age and therefore no longer directly influence their parents' participation.

Socioeconomic Status

A second major complex of background variables—socioeconomic status—affect markedly an individual's participation in voluntary action. Socioeconomic status variables include income level, education, self-rated or other-rated social class level, occupational prestige, home ownership and other physical possessions, etc.

Whether measured by any one of these factors or by a combined index of several of these factors, people of higher socioeconomic status are much more likely to become involved in voluntary action than are lower-status people. This is a matter of degree, however, and there are gradual changes in individual participation rates corresponding to positions all along the socioeconomic status continuum.

More is known about the voluntary activities of the middle classes than about the upper class or the working (blue collar) and lower classes. There's relatively little information about rates of participation within upper-class elites, although scanty evidence suggests that, in addition to participation in exclusive clubs of various sorts, upper-class individuals often accept membership and even titular leadership positions in mixed socioeconomic status voluntary groups and programs without participating actively in them.

Middle-class individuals tend to be the backbone of and most active participators in most voluntary organizations (with the exception of exclusively upper-class or working-class groups).

Working-class and lower-class individuals are least likely to join voluntary associations or programs. But once members, they're often active participants, especially when the affairs of the association directly affect them (for example, the political and civic realms) or where the activities are social, recreational, or religious in nature. When they do get involved, lower-status individuals are more likely to participate in immediately self-gratifying social and recreational organizations than

in instrumental, external, goal-oriented groups.

By contrast, middle-class individuals are proportionately more likely to join the latter kind of instrumental voluntary group or program that's trying to have some kind of an effective impact on the larger society or a segment of it.

Socio-Physical Characteristics

These various factors—sex, race, physical health, physical abilities—don't tend to cluster together to form a coherent general factor (unlike socioeconomic status measures). Rather, they should be viewed simply as different aspects of the same larger *analytical* category. They aren't *purely* "physical," since their importance for behavior is partly a result of customary *social reactions* to the given physical traits.

In earlier periods of U.S. history, among the lower and working classes in our society at present, and in most other countries of the world that have been studied, males tend to participate more than females in organized voluntary action. With increasing equality for women in this country, however, recent evidence indicates little difference between the sexes in the total *amount* of voluntary activity they engage in.

There have been and are differences in the *patterns* or *types* of voluntary activities that men versus women engage in. Women, for instance, have usually been more active in charitable, health, and welfare forms of voluntary action. Men have been more active in political and economic forms of voluntary action. These differences clearly seem to be a matter of custom and learning, rather than the result of any sort of physiological-biological necessity.

Thus, as customary sex roles change in our society and elsewhere, the sex differentials in participation patterns will probably also change.

To study the impact of race on voluntary action, it's necessary to control for the effects of other related variables such as socioeconomic status that also influence rates of voluntary participation. When this is done, recent studies in the U.S. have shown that lower-status blacks have somewhat higher participation rates than lower-status whites, while among middle-class individuals the rates are similar for these two races, with a slight tendency for more participation among whites. No comparable recent studies include Orientals.

While the *amount* of voluntary participation doesn't seem to vary greatly by race when other factors are controlled, major differences do remain in the *patterns* of participation. These differences are in large measure the legacy of patterns of discrimination and exclusion, both past and present. When those patterns of discrimination and exclusion change, change may be expected in the types of voluntary groups blacks (and other racial groups) participate in.

Personal health and physical abilities have rarely been studied di-

rectly in relation to individual voluntary action. In general, however, the evidence suggests that temporary disabilities and poor health result in only temporary decreases in voluntary activity. More extended and severe or chronic disabilities and illnesses are associated with correspondingly low participation rates over long time spans.

Personal health and physical abilities appear to have the greatest effect on voluntary participation that requires physical mobility, travel, and the expenditure of physical energy, in contrast to forms of participation involving sociability. Also, group membership is less likely to be affected than is actual participation.

Group and Organizational Affiliations

Various kinds of affiliations have an important impact on voluntary activity, even though voluntary activity itself involves group affiliation. People who have orderly career patterns (versus much job-hopping, odd hours, frequent unemployment, and major changes in types of work) are more likely to participate in voluntary associations and programs. The more settled and secure the occupational life, the more time and energy a person usually has to devote to voluntary activity.

Religious affiliations—at least the three broad religious groups in the U.S.—have been studied in relation to voluntary activity. In general, controlling for social class factors, few or no major differences exist in voluntary activity of a non-church-related sort among these three major religious groupings in the U.S. However, there are obvious differences in the patterns of church-related voluntary activity.

Controlling for socioeconomic status factors, political party preference doesn't seem to have any major impact on amount of participation in voluntary activity. But participation in voluntary action of all kinds tends to be more frequent among people more involved in various kinds of political activity (voting, campaigning, attending political speeches and lectures, belonging to a political voluntary organization).

Students, especially in high schools and colleges, are more likely to be involved in various kinds of voluntary action than are similar people not affiliated with a school. Most of the higher participation of students is concentrated in special school-related and school-based voluntary organizations.

However, recently high schools and colleges have had a greater influence in stimulating students to become involved in off-campus participation in numerous kinds of social service and even change-oriented voluntary activity. This is partly because the high school and college campuses have been able to serve as informal clearinghouses for voluntary activity, both stimulating and linking interested students with voluntary programs or groups that need participants.

Informal Interpersonal Relations

These relationships play a key role in all kinds of voluntary activity. If one important side of voluntary action is "people helping people," an equally important other side is "people involving people" in voluntary action. *Most people get involved in most kinds of voluntary actions because some friend, relative, or neighbor asked them to or recommended that they get involved.*

People don't *generally* get involved in a particular kind of voluntary action simply because they read about it in a newspaper or magazine, or simply because they heard about it through the mass media, at a lecture, etc. People move people; people involve other people in things they care about. Thus, personal influence is the crucial triggering factor in the voluntary participation of most people, even though mass media exposure may be a predisposing factor.

Parents' rates of participation in voluntary action are likely to influence both the type and amount of voluntary action of their children, even after the children become adults. In part, participation in voluntary action is learned informally from parents and family just as political preferences, religious beliefs, racial attitudes, and other beliefs and attitudes are learned in the childhood and adolescence.

On the other hand, parents *usually* exert some *direct* pressure on their children's participation (encouraging them to participate or not in certain kinds of voluntary activities,) just as there tends to be some direct influence of children on their parents' participation (for example, getting their parents involved in the P.T.A., Boy or Girl Scouts). In a similar fashion, spouse, other relatives, neighbors, and friends are likely to be major determinants of whether a person joins and participates in particular voluntary groups.

As a result, a person is generally more likely to participate in voluntary action of most kinds if he's more active in informal interpersonal relations of various sorts; the more friends and acquaintances he has, the more relatives he has living nearby and the more frequently he sees them, the more time he spends in interpersonal relationships with friends, relatives and neighbors, etc., the more likely he is to participate.

This may come as a surprise to many people, because it's commonly believed that participation in formal voluntary organizations and programs is a *substitute* for satisfying interpersonal relationships of an informal sort. Not so. The pattern of satisfying, close, informal, interpersonal relationships constitutes one of the most basic and important factors leading to formal voluntary activity of all kinds.

Mass Media Exposure and Other Activities

People who attend more movies, lectures, and plays, who read more newspapers and read them

more frequently, and who read more magazines, journals, and books are more likely to participate in voluntary action of various kinds. These people tend to be more interested in all aspects of the world around them and are more likely to get involved in voluntary action as a part of the ongoing activities of their social environment.

In fact, there's evidence that the person who engages in a significant amount of voluntary action of various kinds is simply a more active person in general. He tends to have an active occupational or professional life, to be active in religious affairs, in civic and political matters, in adult education (night school, special courses), in informal interpersonal relations, in mass media exposure, etc.

People who are busy and involved in one realm of social activity also tend to be busy and involved in other realms. Of course, there are limits to the time and energy of any one person, but this pattern of wide-ranging activity clearly emerges.

This cumulative nature of various kinds of social activities may be called "the general activity syndrome." It has major practical as well as theoretical implications.

Practically, it means that the best person to try to get involved in some kind of voluntary action is *not* someone who's currently uninvolved, but rather someone who already has a record of many voluntary action involvements and who may even now be involved in various other voluntary activities.

Theoretically, the existence of this syndrome is important because it implies that there may well be a single underlying set of psychological traits that characterizes the generally active versus inactive person. If these traits or characteristics can be identified, then we'll have come a long way in understanding and explaining why people get involved not only in voluntary action, but also in other types of social activity.

Conclusion

We have seen that certain kinds of people are more likely to get involved in voluntary action than others. Those who are in the middle of their life cycle, with adequate personal health, with extensive informal interpersonal relationships, who are more exposed to mass media, and of middle or higher socioeconomic status are more likely to join voluntary associations and voluntary action programs and to participate actively in them.

But even when we know *what types* of people are more likely to be involved, the question is *why* are these people more involved than others. What motivates them? This "why" question is answered by a series of attitudes, personality traits and capacities, and social structural and contextual factors that are conducive to joining voluntary groups and participating actively in them. These factors will be explored in a "why" article in the next issue of the *Journal of Extension.*