

## *Trends in Social Participation*

Even though knowledge is limited, we may know  
more than is presently being  
applied to organizations

SIDNEY J. MILLER

*and*

W. KEITH WARNER

ALTHOUGH much time and effort has been expended in the study of social participation, there are rather limited data regarding trends. Available information suggests that various segments of the population, particularly the young and the old, are organizationally underprivileged. Current population figures indicate an increase in the size and proportion of these segments of the population. There are also indications that these people, and consequently society, face increasing problems. It is suggested that more extensive participation in useful activities of our society can assist in coping with these problems. Therefore, the leaders of organizations are confronted with a challenge.

A question is often asked about changes or trends in social relationships. We want to know what kinds of alterations are going on which might affect established ways of thinking or acting. We would like to know what changes are occurring, in order to better understand the circumstances prevalent in our society. As a basis for analyzing present knowledge on the subject, the following questions are posed in this paper: What do research findings indicate about changes or trends in social participation of people? What societal patterns have affected or been affected by these participation trends? How can knowledge of changes in patterns of participation assist in coping with problems resulting from recent changes in our society?

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SIDNEY J. MILLER is a Research Assistant and W. Keith Warner is Associate Professor, Department of Rural Sociology, University of Wisconsin.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT TRENDS

There is knowledge of trends in some areas of social participation. For example, studies have been made of rural organizations in Wisconsin by A. F. Wileden. He notes an increase in the total number of organizations, a decrease in the number of independent local organizations, and an increase in the number of local organizations with state affiliation. He also notes a tendency for local groups of similar nature to work together in a council or federation and for growing organizations to be those able to secure the services and counsel of professional personnel.<sup>1</sup>

Research on the national level reveals an increase in church membership (this trend has been noted for a long time).<sup>2</sup> It is also noted that membership in labor unions has been increasing.<sup>3</sup> This has less direct application to rural society than church membership, but is of interest because of (1) current attempts to unionize farm laborers, (2) the increasing numbers of part-time farmers whose off-the-farm employment leads toward union contact, (3) the number of rural people moving to the city or urban fringe who find urban employment where union labor is involved, and (4) increasing efforts of rural communities to try to attract industry.

Three other trends have considerable significance to an understanding of social participation in rural life. The first is the shift from kinship associations and locality bonds to special interest groupings. People previously participated in group activities on the basis of kinship ties or simply because they happened to live in the same local area without means for going elsewhere. They now associate more on the basis of interests. This may take them away from kin and their local areas.

Second, there is a parallel between trends to urbanization, commercialization, and industrialization on the one hand, and an increasing number of special-interest associations on the other. Research indicates that these factors are related. Finally, at least in some organizations, there is a trend toward a decreasing number of local units but an increase in the number of members.

<sup>1</sup>A. F. Wileden, *Trends in Rural Organizations in Wisconsin*, Extension Service Special Circular (Madison: University of Wisconsin, College of Agriculture, 1951), pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup>See Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1955), pp. 60-61; Murray Gendell and Hans L. Zetterberg (eds.), *A Sociological Almanac for the United States* (New York: The Bedminster Press, 1961), p. 76; and U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C., 1960), p. 228.

<sup>3</sup>George Leland Bach, *Economics: An Introduction to Analysis and Policy* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1954), pp. 413-14.

These trends can be viewed against the background of considerable information available regarding participation. For example, Barber has made three general observations about participation and apathy in the United States. He says there is (1) almost a countless number of organizations, (2) a large number who belong to no organizations, and (3) in any given organization, an active minority and an inactive majority.<sup>4</sup> Evidence is that much of the talk about our communities being over-organized may be misleading. Certain kinds of people (especially those with higher education, incomes, or prestige) may be deeply involved in organizational activities; however, substantial numbers in the same communities may remain virtually untouched by this over-organization.

There is reason to believe that the reservoir of accumulated knowledge regarding the dynamics of participation has not been adequately tapped. Methods of organizing groups, techniques for increasing participation, and effects of various leadership styles are examples of kinds of information which have not been sufficiently transferred into the operation of groups and organizations.

#### WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

There are areas of social participation in which our knowledge of trends is rather limited. For example, no one knows exactly how many formally organized voluntary groups there are in rural society, or in the United States generally. And no one knows how many there were a decade or two ago. Hence, we cannot say anything precise about such trends. We do know that the number is large and continues to grow. In fact, one writer says that there are probably more groups in our society than there are individuals.<sup>5</sup> If this is true, we can predict that as the population grows the number of groups will increase at an accelerated rate.

It is not known exactly how many individuals are members of rural organizations, or what the trends are regarding membership. We do have considerable information concerning the proportion of the population in specific locales who report affiliation with or

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Barber, "Participation and Mass Apathy in Associations," in Alvin W. Gouldner (ed.), *Studies in Leadership* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), pp. 478-87. See also Charles R. Wright and Herbert H. Hyman, "Voluntary Association Memberships of American Adults: Evidence From National Sample Surveys," *American Sociological Review*, XXIII (June, 1958), 284-94 and John C. Scott, Jr., "Membership and Participation in Voluntary Associations," *American Sociological Review*, XXII (June, 1957), 315-26.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Bierstedt, *The Social Order: An Introduction to Sociology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1957), p. 244.

organizations.<sup>6</sup> The proportion usually varies with age, sex, marital status, social status, rurality of residence, and the length of residence in the community.

The extent of involvement, beyond simple membership, for participants in formal voluntary associations in the United States is unknown. Neither is it known whether the amount and kind of participation is changing in one direction or another. The total amounts of time, money, effort, and other resources which are invested in the thousands of organizations in our society are unknown; consequently it is not possible to identify trends or the extent to which investments of resources are repaid by effective operation and success on the part of organizations. There is limited information from a relatively few studies concerning particular organizations, but aggregate information is not available.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Influences on Participation*

As changes in organizations and participation patterns are examined, many influences appear to have bearing. Some are in the direction of increasing participation; others are in the direction of declining participation. For example, it appears that the proliferation of organizations (related to urbanization and industrialization) presents people with more opportunities for participation in a wider variety of organized activities. And it seems that the increasing numbers and density of people and the increasing complexity of society has led individuals to see the need for and advantage in joining voices, opinions, and actions in order to reach their goals. These trends point to increasing participation.

At the same time, there is a tendency toward increased reliance upon the professional or the expert and increased utilization of commercial agencies. As a result, the place of the layman and his abilities in our organized activities has been minimized.<sup>8</sup> Also, the trend toward larger and more centralized organizations has di-

<sup>6</sup> See Raymond Payne, "Some Comparisons of Participation in Rural Mississippi, Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, and New York," *Rural Sociology*, XVIII (June, 1953), 671-72.

<sup>7</sup> For examples: (a) relative to changes see Roy C. Buch and Louis A. Ploch, *Factors Related to Changes in Social Participation in a Rural Pennsylvania Community*, Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 582 (State College: Pennsylvania State University, 1954); (b) relative to extent of activity see W. A. Anderson, *Social Participation of Rural-Nonfarm Adults*, Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 928 (Ithaca: New York State College of Agriculture, 1958); (c) relative to particular organizations see Rensis Likert, *New Patterns of Management* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), pp. 140-61.

<sup>8</sup> See Lowry Nelson, Charles E. Ramsey, and Coolie Verner, *Community Structure and Change* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), pp. 255-57.

minished the importance of any given member and concentrated activities of organizations in relatively fewer hands. These trends point to decreased participation.

#### PROBLEMS CREATED BY CHANGE

In addition to examining organizations and participation directly, it is possible to recognize other trends in society which affect, or are affected by, organizational membership and activity. Three problem areas will be identified. These problems constitute a real challenge to organizational leaders.

##### *Young People*

The transformation occurring in society as a result of mechanization, the increasing educational level, etc., has produced a situation which poses serious problems for young people. They are being maintained for longer periods in the "artificial" world of school life. They are isolated from functionally significant participation in the community and society and are not given adequate opportunity for and assistance in doing *important* things. While these problems have long been evident in urban America, they are increasing in importance in rural life.

The essence of this problem is that young people are increasingly isolated from significant work responsibility and activity in the adult world. The resulting void has not been adequately filled. Sometimes the emphasis appears to be on keeping them occupied, especially via recreation, entertainment, and character-building education. All of these are good, but not adequate to meet the needs of youth when they are suddenly faced with the reality and urgency of responsible adulthood.

There has been a proliferation of organizations for or including young people which could have met the challenge—but they have not done so. Young people—especially those in the transition to adulthood—are what we might call "organizationally underprivileged." This is the case because of the nature of activities, the exclusion of youth from functionally important tasks in organizations, the community, and society, and because disproportionately fewer are induced to participate in formal organizations.

Group pressures are powerful; they can lead young people to do things which are quite contrary to the teachings of their parents and society as well as provide potential means for reinforcing such teachings. Group influences can lead young people to do

things which they would never do alone. One of the great challenges of today is to learn how to use the power of group influence to support, not oppose, the moral and ethical goals of parents, the church, and society.

### *The Elderly*

Trends in population growth, individual longevity, and trends toward earlier retirement have resulted in a rapidly growing segment of society made up of people who have been abruptly cut off from the main stream of activity, after a veritable lifetime of work and participation. Numerous studies have shown that these people are also organizationally underprivileged. It is true that groups have been organized to occupy their time, but it remains important to ask about the extent to which some of this may be "busy work" rather than constructive and important contributions to and participation in the affairs of society. But again, we do not have adequate information on this participation trend. Recent studies indicate disproportionately low amounts of participation for this older-age segment of the population.<sup>9</sup> We can wonder about the contribution these people could make if they were provided opportunities for important participation.

Rural non-farm areas are absorbing a good part of the increase in the numbers of older people, and thus are faced with the challenge of helping these people make and enjoy a good life.

### *Changing Population Numbers*

We have been made aware of the dramatic increase in the number of people in our communities, our nation, and in the world. We have also observed that these people are increasingly concentrated in urban and suburban areas. It is not surprising that organizational proliferation has accompanied urbanization; organizations provide a means of getting one's voice heard, of finding personal identity, of gaining friends and associates, of sharing special interests, of providing special services, and of participating in community decision making. Such benefits might not otherwise be available extensively.

The increasing number and density of people, the increasing independence of people (including town and country) pose these

<sup>9</sup> See Selz C. Mayo, "Social Participation Among the Older Population in Rural Areas of Wake County, North Carolina," *Social Forces*, XXX (October, 1951), 26-32.

problems: How shall opportunities be provided for people to take part in the crucial, necessary activities of society? And how can these people find a significant place in the crowd? These are challenges for organizations and other avenues of participation.

While the so-called population explosion may be significant for youth and others who are leaving our rural areas and for the fringe areas around urban centers, it is not a major concern for many rural communities. For them the problem is population decline.<sup>10</sup> This leaves organizations with the task of adjusting to the exit of young people and to shrinking membership. The problem of trying to maintain elaborate organizational structures with fewer people and resources or of attempting to modify structures in line with the changing community situation arises.

#### SUMMARY

An effort has been made to point to areas of knowledge and gaps of knowledge in relation to trends in social participation. There is much we do not know about rural society that ought to be known. What we do know indicates that the trend in the amount and importance of social participation is upward and that the amount and importance of participation is probably increasing faster than our understanding of it. Many related problems challenge the adequacy of present modes of participation and suggest the need for changing patterns.

A great deal is known about many aspects of social participation even if relatively little firm information is available concerning trends. Knowledge of the situation may help more clearly identify possible trends. Perhaps the most thought-provoking assertion of all is that we probably already know more about social participation than is being applied.

<sup>10</sup> See M. G. Al-Khazraji and D. G. Marshall, *Wisconsin's Bayfield County: A Comparative Analysis of Some Changing Aspects of Population and Agriculture, 1940-60*, Department of Rural Sociology Population Series No. 4 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, College of Agriculture, 1963); and M. G. Al-Khazraji and D. G. Marshall, *Wisconsin's Changing North: An Analysis of Selected Social and Economic Characteristics, 1940-1960*, Department of Rural Sociology Population Note No. 2 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, College of Agriculture, 1962).