
Information Seeking and Adult Education

As community or reading orientation increases, the likelihood that women will participate in adult education increases

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To reach wider and more diverse audiences it is necessary to know more about women who do and who do not currently participate in Extension-type programs. This suggests the need to better understand the information-seeking patterns of women of differing levels of education, work patterns, and participation in community affairs. A study was made in Nebraska of similarities and differences among women as participators in adult education and users of mass media as sources of information. The study was based on a statewide sample of 644 women, ages 21 through 69, randomly selected. Findings are interpreted in relation to their possible meaning for Extension programming.

WHY DO adults engage in adult education? This question is of great interest to Extension educators who are actively exploring ways adults can continue their education and be reached through Extension educational programs. Mass communicators ask a similar question: Why do adults watch, listen, or read? A comparative analysis of these two questions is important: If mass media and adult education serve similar functions for different types of people, then some adults might be encouraged to selectively use mass media as part of their own educational programs. If mass media and adult education serve two different functions for most women, then they can be regarded as complementing each other.

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This report presents similarities and differences of adult women as participants in adult education and as users of mass media.¹ Adult education is defined as sustained and organized activity engaged in primarily to increase knowledge and competence. It includes, along with Extension education, programs for adults sponsored by schools, employers, libraries, and various community agencies. Mass media includes both print media (such as books, magazines, newspapers, and bulletins) and broadcast media (radio and television). The general framework for this analysis was based on the following four assumptions:

1. *Adult education activity is community based; mass media use is home based.* Persons who engage in adult education must generally go outside of the home to participate. Mass media are typically available at home. We would thus expect women who participate in adult education to be more community oriented. This would be evidenced by their working outside the home and by participating in meetings, church activities, community projects, and politics. If a woman is community oriented but not working, we might ask: To what extent is participation in community activities a substitute for working? Does volunteer activity encourage participation in community-based information seeking, such as adult education?

2. *Adult education participation requires an orientation toward print media.* Because adult education activity typically includes reading and study, women who participate in adult education would be expected to be more "reading oriented" than women who do not participate. It is also assumed that participants in adult education tend to be more oriented to print media than to broadcast media.

3. *Mass media serve two basic functions: to provide information and to provide escape.* Communication theorists identify two major functions of mass media.² One function is as a medium for contributory effects: to reinforce existing opinion or recent decisions, to increase knowledge and information on a wide range of topics, or to provide a tool for personal growth and development. The second function is as escapist fare: to provide mental and physical relaxation, to stimulate the imagination, and to act as a means of vicarious interaction. The first function represents a search for instrumental information; the second, a search for the primarily expressive experience. A woman may participate in an Extension educa-

¹ This research project was directed by Alan B. Knox at the Office of Adult Education Research, University of Nebraska. The analysis was made by Shirley A. Marsh, research associate.

² J. T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960).

tional program because she needs information to be a better homemaker, to use better management skills. Or she may want to enrich her life, using the information for personal development.

Print media are predominantly instrumental. The reader can control the occasion and direction of exposure. He can re-read. He can select his own level of complexity. Broadcast media are predominantly expressive. They provide a sense of participation that approximates face-to-face interaction.

4. *Formal education is highly correlated with adult education activity.* In research studies that attempt to identify correlates of adult education activity, the one variable that is most highly and consistently associated is level of formal education.³

THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The comparison of mass media and adult education is not presented as a basis for exploring their parallel functions as instrumental and expressive forms of information seeking. The purpose of this report is to explore the potential utility of comparing the two types of information seeking within a single conceptual framework. The comparison is a way of exploring whether each serves a similar function for different kinds of women, or whether each serves a contrasting function for most women. As adult educators, Extension program developers are constantly confronted with problems of assessing the contribution of both in achieving objectives.

Methods

This comparative analysis of adult education and use of mass media as forms of information seeking was based on data from 644 Nebraska women, ages 21 through 69. The statewide sample was randomly selected. Demographic characteristics of the sample were compared with data from 1960 United States census reports; the sample was highly representative. Trained interviewers, using a uniform interview schedule, collected data from these women as to their use of mass media and their community participation.

The sample was divided into sub-populations on the basis of three relevant variables (see Table 1): (1) level of formal education, (2) working status, and (3) extent of community participation. Women having at least a high school diploma were classified as having high educational levels; women with less education were designated as low. Women were also classified as working (part or full time) and non-working.

³ John W. C. Johnstone and Ramon Rivera, *Volunteers for Learning* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1965), p. 103.

Because many community participation variables were correlated with organizational membership, this latter variable was used as an index of community participation. Women who belonged to three or more organizations were classified as high community participators, those belonging to one or two as medium, and those belonging to no organizations were classified as low participators. Extent of adult education participation was based on participation in programs sponsored by all types of agencies.

FINDINGS

When all working women were compared with all non-working women, there were significant differences in community size and age.⁴ It was concluded that these differences were due to classifying farm women as "non-working." Many were actually engaged in the farm business. Working women tended to be older, with most in the middle-age group. The largest proportion of these women lived in metropolitan areas. Conversely, non-working women were younger, with the largest proportion living in rural areas. When community participation levels and level of education were the same, these significant differences in community size and age tended to disappear.

High education groups tended to have women of all ages. In low education groups, however, most non-workers were young, while

Table 1. Characteristics of sub-populations of 644 women randomly selected, according to work status, level of education, and community participation.

N=48	N=38	N=44	N=72
High Ed	Low Ed	High Ed	Low Ed
High CP	High CP	High CP	High CP
Working	Working	Non-working	Non-working
N=30	N=56	N=40	N=150
High Ed	Low Ed	High Ed	Low Ed
Medium CP	Medium CP	Medium CP	Medium CP
Working	Working	Non-working	Non-working
N=10	N=37	N=20	N=99
High Ed	Low Ed	High Ed	Low Ed
Low CP	Low CP	Low CP	Low CP
Working	Working	Non-working	Non-working

N=number of women; Ed=educational level; CP=community participation.

⁴ Contingency Chi Square and the Fisher Exact Probability tests were used to ascertain the extent to which the sub-populations were significantly different. Each of the 12 sub-populations was compared with every other one on every variable. The obtained probabilities were considered significant if they exceeded the .05 level.

the majority of working women were in the middle-age group. These age differences are assumed to result from differences in family life cycles. Women who do not continue beyond high school tend to marry earlier and have families. This removes them from the labor force during their young adult years.

As Table 2 indicates, the group of working women who were high community participators differed most from all other groups. These women were all under 60, and more than 60 per cent were in the middle-age category.

Further analysis of the relationship between community size and community participation among those with the same level of education indicated that differences were not significant for the low education sub-populations, but were for high education sub-populations. Most of this was attributable to the fact that 40 per cent of

Table 2. Percentage distribution of "low education" women by age categories according to work status and community participation.

Work status	Age	Community participation		
		High	Medium	Low
Working	Young	24	27	8
	Middle	60	41	49
	Old	16	20	35
	Aged	0	12	8
	Total	100	100	100
Non-working	Young	31	46	41
	Middle	40	25	31
	Old	15	14	13
	Aged	14	15	15
	Total	100	100	100

Young = 21-34 years.
Middle = 35-49 years.

Old = 50-59 years.
Aged = 60-69 years.

the non-working women were farm women. A high proportion of rural women were in non-working, medium-community-participation sub-populations.

Among women with less education, working women tended to be older. Among women with more education, working women tended to reside in urban areas. These differences, however, would not be expected to greatly affect generalizations regarding the relation between working and information seeking.

Participation in Adult Education

A higher proportion of community-oriented than home-oriented

women in this study did participate in adult education activities. Working women would be expected to be more aware of community problems and more active in the community. Their jobs might even require continuing education. There was also the anticipated high correlation between extent of adult education participation and years of formal education.

All working women and the two groups of non-working, high-community-participation women were classified as community oriented. Their level of participation in adult education was significantly higher than for home-oriented women. This suggests that community participation is a substitute for working insofar as it encourages further participation in community-based activities such as adult education.

Findings suggest further that even for working women, a high level of community participation is an even more important factor in their participation in adult education than the fact that they have a job outside of the home.

Use of Mass Media

Mass media were used more by women who did not work and who had low community participation. These women spent significantly more hours per day viewing television than did community-oriented women. However, they spent fewer hours with radio, possibly because television dominated their time. Non-working women spent more hours with both television and radio than did working women.

More than 80 per cent of all the women read newspapers daily, except for one group: women who did not work and had low education and low community participation. In this group the readership was 70 per cent. Highest readership was in the group of women who worked and who had high education and high community participation.

Magazine readership was relatively uniform among all groups. However, in groups with high community participation (with the same levels of education), working women spent more time reading magazines than did those who did not work. The same pattern was observed on number of books read. As community participation increased, book readership increased.

Clearly, mass media usage differed among groups. When educational level was the same, the broadcast media were used more by the women who were not working and had low community participation. Print media were dominant for working women and high community participators.

Media Use by Adult Education Participants

Adult education participants reported greater use of print than broadcast media, compared with non-participants. They also read many more books each year. They reported reading a greater number of different magazines, which may indicate that they were more aware of multiple sources of information. They did not differ as much in number of hours spent reading magazines.

Orientation toward print media seems also to be a function of level of education, as shown in Table 3. Highly educated working women who were active community participators were also highest in adult education participation. They showed a high orientation toward print media and a low orientation toward non-print media. Their counterparts who were not working were high users of all mass media. Women who were not working and who were low in education and in community participation were also lowest in use of print media and in adult education participation, but were high in use of broadcast media.

Working vs. Non-Working Women

Most women who did not work or belong to community organizations and who had a low reading orientation did not participate

Table 3. Rank order of proportion of women using mass media and participating in adult education, according to work status and levels of education and community participation.

Group	Print media			Non-print media		Participation in adult education	
	News-papers	Variety of magazines	Books	Radio	TV	Ever	Last year
Working							
Hed-HCP	1	1	1	12	10	1	2
Hed-MCP	6	6	4	11	11	6	11
Hed-LCP	11	12	9.5	7.5	8.5	6	6
LEd-HCP	9	5	6	10	12	3	3
LEd-MCP	5	9	8	4	7	9	7
LEd-LCP	7	10	11	9	6	10	5
Non-working							
Hed-HCP	2	2	3	1	2	2	1
Hed-MCP	8	4	9.5	6	3	6	12
Hed-LCP	3	3	2	7.5	8.5	12	9
LEd-HCP	4	7	5	2	4	4	4
LEd-MCP	10	8	7	3	5	8	8
LEd-LCP	12	11	12	5	1	11	10

Hed, LEed = High, low education.

HCP, MCP, LCP = High, medium, low community participation.

in adult education. An increase in either community orientation or reading orientation tended to increase the proportion of women who engaged in adult education.

In the two groups with no community participation, less than 5 per cent had participated in any adult education during the previous year. In one of these two groups, the highly educated women who did not work had a high reading orientation but still did not participate in adult education.

High community participators were also highest in reading orientation and highest in adult education participation, compared to all non-working groups.

This pattern of adult education participation also prevailed among working women. At each educational level, adult education participation increased as community participation increased and as reading orientation increased. Comparable proportions of women who either engaged in community activity or worked outside the home also participated in adult education. An even higher proportion of women who engaged in both types of community activity participated in adult education.

Although community participation and working were expected to have similar influence on adult education participation, data showed that community participation was a stronger influence.

SUMMARY

Participation in adult education was accompanied by a community orientation and a reading orientation. Women with the highest participation in adult education had the highest level of print media use and the highest level of community participation. An increase in either orientation was associated with an increase in the proportion of women who engaged in adult education. Highest increases in adult education participation occurred when both orientations increased.

A greater proportion of community-oriented women than home-oriented women were adult education participants. Home-oriented women were higher users of mass media than were community-oriented women, but patterns of the types of media that were dominant varied among sub-populations. Adult education participants reported proportionally greater use of print media than broadcast media, when compared with non-participants.

INTERPRETATION

The nationwide trend is toward expanding educational programs offered through Home Economics Extension. To reach an even

wider audience, it is necessary to know how characteristics of women not being reached compare with those of current participants. Designing an Extension program to meet the diverse needs and interests that exist, even within a relatively small geographical area, presents complex problems. We have suggested that Extension educators can more effectively reach women in all segments of society if there is a better understanding of the patterns of information seeking by women with differing levels of education and differing amounts of community participation.

The following interpretations of findings of this study are tentative: their tenability needs to be tested by further research and program experimentation.

1. To increase the proportion of community-oriented women from all educational levels who participate in adult education programs, Extension educators should closely relate the program to the women's goals in both work and community organizations. Participation in adult education and use of mass media are both highly associated with the user's level of formal education. But use of adult education and media is also associated with community orientation, both working outside the home and membership in voluntary organizations. Voluntary membership, however, is more highly associated with adult education than is working. Findings in this report do not show that any one variable causes any of the others. The associations between working, voluntary organization membership, and adult education participation are probably all characteristic of somewhat more alert and active women. Participation in adult education and use of mass media both result from many influences on the individual. It is important not to oversimplify the interrelationships.

2. Home Economics Extension personnel should explore ways to use television to reach home-oriented women and broadcast-oriented women. These women can thus achieve many of the educational objectives that other women gain through community-based adult education programs. Non-working women with low education and low community participation watch television the most and participate least in adult education. Extension can reach these women through educational programs on commercial stations and on educational television. It will be necessary, however, to develop programming that provides a transition between the entertainment function of television and a formal educational program. Part of the problem lies in programming, but another part lies in encouraging women to watch educational programs. Personal contact might be used to encourage women in target populations to watch the ap-

appropriate channel at the right time. Extension personnel might contact certain women and urge them to encourage their acquaintances to watch educational programs. In urban areas this process might be facilitated by use of viewing groups.

3. Mass media can be used to encourage participation in community-based adult education programs. For example, Operation Alphabet uses television to teach illiterate adults to read, and the television programs of the American Library Association encourage reading. Through these and similar approaches, Extension educators can help reduce the proportion of women who restrict themselves to home-oriented activities, especially after they no longer have young children at home.

4. Before we can expect more extensive participation in adult education efforts from some segments of the population we may need to first help them become better readers or more highly reading oriented. Orientation to print media may be prerequisite to participation in many adult education activities. Also, use of print media may be the most efficient source of knowledge for the non-community-participant. Even if more effective use can be made of broadcast media (radio and TV) in reaching the non-participant, such efforts may have to be supplemented with printed matter. Consequently, efforts directed to improving reading skills and orientation (by such means as bookmobiles, libraries, and literacy teaching) may deserve high priority.

Extension educators must continue to search for channels of communication to reach people who have never participated in programs or been aware of information available to them. Educators must experiment more with mass communication techniques and utilize them to reach the huge potential mass media audience. This inevitably requires the adult educator to assess his communication skills. Perhaps it's time to make that assessment, as Extension educators face the challenge of reaching "all of the people."

READING GOOD BOOKS is not something to be indulged in as a luxury. It is a necessity for anyone who intends to give his life and work a touch of quality. The most real wealth is not what we put into our piggy banks but what we develop in our heads. Books instruct us without anger, threats, and harsh discipline. They do not sneer at our ignorance or grumble at our mistakes. They ask only that we spend some time in the company of greatness so that we may absorb some of its attributes.

—THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA.