

Why Do People Participate in Voluntary Action?

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In the last issue of the *Journal of Extension*, the authors discussed: "Who participates in voluntary action?" They summarized some studies that point out that people who participate in voluntary action appear to have different characteristics than those who don't participate. This article focuses on *why* these people participate in voluntary action.

Reddy and Smith focus on attitudes, personal traits and capacities, and social structure and contextual factors that affect why people volunteer for action programs. They discuss some points that may challenge your thinking about volunteer participation.

Attitudes

Attitudes—dispositions to respond (in terms of ideas, emotions, and actions) to particular situations, people, objects, or events—can be divided into two categories: *general* and *specific*.

A number of *general attitudes* have been found conducive to voluntary action in social scientific research studies. People are *more* likely to become involved in voluntary action if they're characterized by any or all of the following:

1. A strong general sense of *moral, civic, or social obligation* to participate in voluntary

action and civic and social service activities.

2. A *service orientation* toward *leisure time*—an attitude that leisure time shouldn't be simply used for self-gratification, but rather should be devoted partly to social service and human betterment.
3. *Strongly positive attitudes toward one's local community*, its people, organizations, and activities.
4. A *preference for formal, organized groups* as a way of accomplishing goals in general (rather than unorganized, individual action or informal,

- unorganized collective action).
5. Strongly *positive attitudes toward the efficacy of voluntary associations* and voluntary action programs.
 6. *Low degrees of alienation*; few feelings of powerlessness and social isolation.
 7. Perceptions that one's family, friends, and "*significant others*" *generally approve of voluntary action* and one's participation in it.

In addition to these general attitudes, several kinds of more *specific attitudes* are conducive to participation. These specific attitudes refer to a particular voluntary association or voluntary action program, rather than to aspects of voluntary action in general.

An individual is *more likely* to join and participate actively in a particular kind of voluntary action or group if he holds any or all of the following attitudes toward that group:

1. A strong *sense of commitment* to the goals and aims of the particular group; a sense of identification with the fortunes of the group; loyalty to the group.
2. An attitude that the *specific group is attractive*, worthwhile, generally rewarding; a feeling that the group has a good image or status in the community or larger society.
3. An attitude that the group is or will be *personally rewarding* to the individual; that the

benefits of participation far outweigh the various costs involved.

4. A feeling of social, civic, or *moral obligation* to join and participate in the particular group.
5. A sense of *personal "fit"* with the specific group and its activities; a matching of one's own needs and talents with the needs, demands, roles and opportunities provided by the group.
6. An attitude that the *specific group has been effective* in the past and will continue to be effective in the future in achieving its goals or performing its services and activities.
7. A feeling that one's family, friends, and "*significant others*" *generally have a positive attitude* toward the particular group and one's own participation in it.
8. A personal sense of social support, belongingness, and fellowship from *within the group itself* and its members/participants.

Thus, one part of the answer to "Why do people participate in voluntary action?" is that they have positive *general attitudes* toward and related to organized voluntary action, as well as positive *specific attitudes* toward a particular voluntary association or program. Successful voluntary associations and programs create and maintain these attitudes in their members and supporters

through effective public relations, communication, recruitment, training, and leadership.

Personality Traits and Capacities

Personality traits are relatively enduring, individual, response dispositions (to think, feel, and act). They're relevant and salient in a broad variety of situations, rather than being associated with a particular object, person, situation, or event (as are attitudes). The deepest, most central, and most enduring personality traits of an individual may be seen at one end of a continuum of response dispositions, with highly specific attitudes at the other end. In the middle portion of the continuum fall general attitudes.

Several broad kinds of personality traits have been found conducive to joining and participating in voluntary associations and action programs. Participation is generally greater for persons characterized by any of the following:

1. Extroversion, sociability, friendliness, social confidence (vs. introversion, interpersonal cynicism, distrust).
2. Ego-strength, psychic adjustment, satisfaction, optimism, positive self-image, self-confidence (vs. anxiety, neuroticism, pessimism, dissatisfaction).
3. Dominance, aggressiveness, personal autonomy, "leadership," assertiveness (vs. submissiveness, shyness, depen-

dence, conformity, acquiescence).

4. Achievement motivation, efficacy, competence, perseverance (vs. fatalism, alienation, powerlessness, apathy, lack of aspirations).
5. Flexibility, adaptability, readiness to change (vs. rigidity, compulsiveness, authoritarianism, inflexibility).
6. Morality, superego strength, altruism (vs. lack of interpersonal and group orientation or concern, selfishness, expedient orientation).

Some weaker evidence indicates that participation is greater for people who have greater empathy and need for relational closeness, higher energy levels and activity needs, and greater orientation toward planning and concern for the future.

As distinct from personality traits and attitudes, *capacities* (abilities, kinds of intelligence, and skills) are the probabilities of response and behavior of a specified kind, given the disposition to respond. Thus, capacities define the bounds within which personality traits and attitudes may be expressed. Capacities are the limits of what we can do, given the disposition to do something.

So far, only one general type of capacity has been studied extensively in relation to participation in voluntary action. The results indicate that those who join and participate actively in voluntary action have higher *verbal abilities* and, presumably, higher general intelligence than

others. Some evidence suggests that people with greater *social skills* (abilities to deal with, influence, and manage people) are more likely to be active in voluntary associations and programs.

Then, a second part of the answer to "Why do people participate in voluntary action?" is that some people have personality traits and capacities especially conducive to voluntary action. However, personality traits and capacities are much more difficult to change than are attitudes. As a result, the best way to use this kind of information about why people participate is in enhancing our understanding of what's happening.

This knowledge can also be used practically in selecting or recruiting by voluntary associations. Recruitment techniques and publicity can be carefully focused to reach people with the central personality needs and traits that make them more likely to get involved.

Social Structural and Contextual Factors

To some extent, individual levels of voluntary action are affected by the internal structure of voluntary group and by the nature of the community and larger society in which the voluntary action takes place. We call these "social structural and contextual" factors because they focus more on the nature of the social system or setting of the individual voluntary action than on an individual's internal characteristics.

Yet these social structural and contextual characteristics can have a major effect on general levels of individual voluntary action. Let's look at some of these characteristics.

Openness of Whole Society

Some societies in history, and even now, have generally suppressed voluntary associations and programs. Or, the government or a particular ruling party has taken over and controlled voluntary action so that it lost its autonomy and independence.

However, in relatively opened societies like ours, voluntary action of all kinds is more frequent, autonomous, strong, and effective. Even so, certain kinds of voluntary action are harassed or suppressed in the U.S. (for example, the Black Panthers).

Nation's Level of Modernization

There appears to be an "organizational revolution," including increases in the number of organizations, that accompanies and follows a nation's industrial revolution. More modern nations have more voluntary action per capita.

Community's Socioeconomic Level

Higher status regions, towns, communities, or neighborhoods tend to have higher rates of participation in voluntary action. The impact of

the socioeconomic status of *one's community* occurs over and above the impact of one's *own* socioeconomic status. The explanation for this impact of community status levels can be found in the differences in voluntary action opportunities and in prevailing attitudes toward voluntary action in higher- versus lower-status communities.

Degree of Community's Development

Holding socioeconomic status constant, some communities simply have greater *overall* levels of organizational development than do others—they have more stores, banks, hospitals, libraries, and motels. These communities are likely to be either the largest city in their local area or at some distance from larger cities. They usually have a well-developed sense of local pride and town "identity." They tend to have a local newspaper that's published explicitly *for* the town.

In these "organizationally developed" towns, more voluntary organizations tend to exist, with generally more individual participation in voluntary action. Again, this is partly due to more opportunities for individual voluntary action and partly to prevailing attitudes of the townspeople who are more conducive to participation.

Since American society is open to voluntary action and is highly modernized, both of these factors foster and stimulate voluntary action. However, *greater* opportunities

for voluntary action programs will generally exist in communities of a higher degree of organizational development. Nevertheless, none of these factors is within the control of an ongoing voluntary association or program except in trying to locate new branches/chapters around the country.

The final two factors to be identified and discussed are more within the control of ongoing associations or programs, even in a specific place.

Eligibility Requirements for Membership and Participation

Eligibility requirements define who *may become* a member and participate in a group. They may be explicit and written in the by-laws or administrative rules of a voluntary group, or they may be implicit and covert, used by those who recruit members but not made clear to outsiders and not written down. They may involve age, sex, physical capacity, race, prior group affiliations, socioeconomic status, or a host of other characteristics. Almost any major human characteristic you can think of is used somewhere by some voluntary group as an eligibility criterion.

While it's likely that only some of those who are eligible (those who *may* be members and *may* participate) actually will join and participate, each eligibility requirement used by a group excludes some types who otherwise might join and participate in the group. A careful,

thoughtful examination of eligibility requirements and recruiting practices may reveal unwarranted exclusion of people who could and would make a contribution to the group's efforts and goals.

Voluntary Groups Internal Structure and Functioning

A number of organizational devices may stimulate a person's desire to become a member or, once a member, to participate actively. Some voluntary groups select their members very carefully and/or put their new members through special training, trial periods, or other experiences. This is the other side of the coin of "exclusiveness" in eligibility requirements.

Exclusive organizations tend to generate more organizational commitment and thus more participation among their members than do *inclusive* organizations.

Some associations and programs *insist* on high participation levels among members (for example, the Rotary Club). Those who aren't willing to go along with these rules are asked to leave or may leave vol-

untarily. Some groups are able to offer their members and/or active participants special and highly attractive benefits that they wouldn't get if they weren't involved with the group. These and other similar devices stimulate membership and participation.

Since joining a group and participating actively in it involves effort, and at times even sacrifices, the more attractive and rewarding the group is, the more likely membership in it will be sought, attitudes toward it will be positive, and participation levels in it will be high.

Conclusion

Ongoing voluntary groups are confronted with the problems of making programs more effective, recruiting new members or new volunteers, choosing members or volunteers for special responsibilities or offices, and so on. An increased awareness of the types of people *who* are most likely to participate and *why* they're likely to participate in a given activity can provide a sound basis for voluntary groups to build their plans on.