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DIFFERENTIATING SOCIO-CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF
SENIOR CITIZEN PARTICIPANTS IN ADULT EDUCATION
ACTIVITIES IN UTAH COUNTY, UTAH

by

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A DISSERTATION

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
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TITLE

**DIFFERENTIATING SOCIO-CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SENIOR
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Chapter I

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Administrators in adult education are constantly trying to broaden the base of participation in their programs as well as to increase the effectiveness of these programs. One way often used to accomplish this has been to gather information about important socio-cultural characteristics and expressed educational needs of various target audiences. Of specific interest to these administrators have been those characteristics which differentiate most clearly between participants and nonparticipants in educational programs. Among the potential benefits of this knowledge is an improvement in the areas of program promotion, adult student counseling, and methodology for teaching adults.

Because of the practical implications of such information, many adult education researchers have stressed the importance of knowing more about the distinguishing characteristics of participants and nonparticipants. Among these researchers are Kreitlow (30), Verner and Newberry (47), Lindenberger and Verner (32), Culbert (10) and Holden (19). The wisdom of taking into account the needs and interests of potential students was mentioned by Stonecipher (43). Rodgers (39) expressed a similar concern when he stressed the importance of planning adult programs with the potential

student and his needs clearly in mind.

One target audience which currently is growing very rapidly in number and receiving increasing attention from adult educators is made up of the senior citizens of America. The findings of many studies suggest that these people are underrepresented in adult education (18, 22).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to obtain important relevant data about senior citizens in Utah County, Utah, which could be used by those planning educational programs for these older people. It was intended that the data would be similarly useful to adult educators and senior citizen leaders in comparable communities throughout the country. The information obtained included degree of participation in social and educational activities, opinions about educational activities, and general socio-cultural characteristics as needed to achieve the stated purpose.

Definition of Terms

This study describes a sample of senior citizens in Utah County, Utah, in February, 1969. A senior citizen refers to a person who is 60 years of age or older.

Friends and relatives refer to those who are perceived by the subject to have been most admired by him at the time of the interview.

Adult education is defined as purposeful activity

which is intended to alter attitudes or increase skills or knowledge. It is planned with definite educational purposes in mind, is usually scheduled at a certain time, and has a competent person in charge who either meets with or corresponds with the student. It includes such activity as lectures, private lessons, television courses, evening classes, correspondence courses, and church programs.

Participant refers to a Utah County senior citizen who attended an adult education program during the twelve months prior to the interview.

Nonparticipant refers to a person who did not attend an adult education program during the twelve months prior to the interview.

Target audience refers to a group of adults for whom an adult education program is planned.

Summary of Related Research

Social scientists for a long time have analyzed various aspects of social participation including involvement in formal and informal groups, special interest units, neighborhoods, and other organizations. Recently considerable attention has been given to those variables which appear to be related to educational and occupational achievement (13, 16). Findings from these studies provide a basis for expectations regarding the social characteristics differentiating participating and nonparticipating senior citizens in adult education programs. These participation studies contribute

the following generalizations regarding adult education participation:

1. Occupation.--Those with professional or managerial positions participate more than semi-skilled or unskilled workers. Adult education agencies tend to obtain clientele from the middle and upper social classes (19).

Occupation also serves as an indicator of the type of participation that might be expected from a person. The higher one goes up the professional scale, the more likely he is to find participants in adult education programs sponsored by a university (5).

2. Income.--Closely related to occupation, as outlined above, is income. The importance of one's income as a measure of anticipated participation has received attention from many (12, 33, 52). Mather (36) found that those in the higher income groups were more likely to participate and to be leaders than those with less income. Although some have suggested that income per se does not bring about heightened social participation, still it seems clear that those with high incomes are more likely to participate than those with low incomes.

3. Formal education.--Another important correlate of social participation and one which evidently provides a person with the knowledge and/or skills necessary to make this participation satisfying and successful is formal education. Many studies have indicated the important relationship which exists between these two variables. This relationship

was noted by Holden (19) and by Agger and Goldrich (2).

The association between formal education and adult education participation is demonstrated well in the findings of London, Wenkert, and Hagstrom (35). Knox (24) found participants in liberal adult education to have more formal education than the general population. Participants in the Johnstone and Rivera (22) study were better educated than the average of the total sample.

4. Age.--Many studies have been conducted in an attempt to discover the relationship between age and participation. Knox and Videbeck (28) have summarized much of this research, especially that dealing with participation of adults in educational activities.

Social participation, as reported by Brunner and associates (5), is generally low for young adults, increases in the late twenties or early thirties, is reasonably constant from thirty-five to fifty, and then begins to decline. This decline may start just after fifty, or it may be delayed until well past sixty. These same writers, in reporting the findings of several studies, found church participation and participation in leisure organizations to follow a different pattern. Participation of this kind may continue to increase until after age sixty (5, 21, 23, 44). Buck and Plock (6), London, Wenkert, and Hagstrom (35), and Holden (19) showed that younger ages are associated with high participation.

Johnstone and Rivera (22) found adult education participants to be younger than average American adults. Rates

of participation varied with age also. These went from a high of 29 per cent among adults in their twenties down to 4 per cent among those seventy years of age or older.

Taiezt and Larson (44) found the following: (a) low socio-economic status and retirement together are associated with low participation in formal organizations; (b) retirement brings changes in the pattern of participation; (c) old age does not bring about a lower participation level as much as low socio-economic status or retirement. They found that, regardless of age, community leadership comes from those in the upper socio-economic classes.

Foskett (14) proposed that most of the association between social participation and age can be explained by other factors. In line with this, Kuhlen (31) indicated that age may be the least important variable over the adult years. He contended that adult educators would find more insight from studying such variables as sex, social status, educational level, and marital status. Kuhlen (31) further pointed out that age means time during which many important things happen for the adult learner. Habits of study are not used. Information is forgotten. Life roles are changed. Demands and goals shift.

The need for caution in making generalizations about the influence of age is demonstrated well by Knox and Videbeck (28). They found that participation in some activities did not vary with age.

5. Community participation.---There appears to be a

close relationship among various aspects of community participation. It would seem logical, therefore, to expect that those who are active in voluntary associations would also participate in adult education. This was the conclusion reached on the basis of the data gathered by Mizruchi and Vanaria (37). They also found that participants in adult education hold more memberships and more offices in voluntary associations than do nonparticipants.

London, Wenkert, and Hagstrom (35) showed that participants in adult education activities and programs were also participants in voluntary associations and community cultural activities.

Agger and Goldrich (2) found a positive relationship between education and community participation. Similarly, Mather (36) demonstrated that the number of organizational memberships per person increases with educational attainment.

Reissman (38) investigated the high correlations normally found between high social class and participation in voluntary associations. His results showed that the high status social group scored high in attendance at organizational meetings, leadership positions held, book reading, magazine reading, and church attendance. The low social group scored high in radio listening and television viewing.

Studies by Kaufman (23) and Scott (40) concluded that leaders for voluntary associations are chosen from the better educated. These leaders could be expected to participate more in adult education activities than their less

educated associates.

6. Adult interests.---Many adult educators have seen the need to know more about adult interests, probably because of an assumption that the interests of the adult tend to determine how he will spend his time. In competition with others, the adult educator seeks the interest, and ultimately the participation, of various target audiences. Brunner and associates (5) pointed out that the relationship between interests and participation is not a simple one. There are problems in assessing interests as well as problems in determining precisely how they influence action. Knox (25) has pointed out that research and theory in this area put interests between experience and future participation. Sometimes experience is used as the independent variable with interest as the dependent variable. At other times, interests are taken as the independent variable with participation as the dependent variable. This is what Thorndike (45) was talking about when he suggested that there is an interplay between interests and behavior that acts to modify both of them.

The theories of changing life roles as set forth by Burkett (7), Havighurst (17), and Kuhlen (31) suggest that younger participants are inclined to enroll for vocational and professional courses while older adults tend toward programs that stress philosophic and interpretive content. The interests of old people are demonstrated by the fact that their participation rates come closer to those of younger

groups for courses in religion and public affairs than is the case in other subject areas (22).

Johnstone and Rivera (22) noted that adults are interested in the practical rather than the academic, the applied rather than the theoretical, skills rather than knowledge or information.

Although Thorndike (46) and others have contended that the total volume of interests and their general content do not change significantly with aging, there does appear to be a shift as indicated above.

7. Health.--There has been relatively little empirical research done regarding the relationship between health and social participation by the aged. Coe and Barnhill (9) tested the hypothesis that participation by older people in clubs requiring active participation would be associated with fewer perceived health problems while membership in clubs requiring passive participation would be related to more perceived health problems. The data gathered indicated that the hypothesis could be supported. There was a moderate positive correlation between the degree of participation by the elderly subjects and their perceived condition of health.

Knox and Videbeck (29) reviewed health constraints upon participation using data taken from a cross-sectional study of 1,500 adults, ages 21 through 69, who were selected by area probability technique and made up a representative cross section of the entire adult population of the State of

Nebraska. Of interest to the present research question are the following results:

- a. Health constraints increased with age.
- b. An association between status and health constraints was noted for upper middle-class adults in their fifties and sixties. These people reported very few constraints.
- c. The health constraints reported by older respondents differed from those reported by younger adults. Similarly, the constraints reported by higher status adults differed from those reported by lower status adults.

Bell and Force (3) and Webber (50) found that older people in good health and those from higher socio-economic levels tend to maintain and even increase their participation in formal associations after age sixty.

8. Past participation.--The data gathered by Videbeck and Knox (48) give evidence that the characteristics which describe high participators among the aged also describe high participators at all ages. High participators for any age group are generally urban dwellers, highly educated, from a high occupational level and socio-economic class. Videbeck and Knox further noted from their data that the best single evidence of how much a particular person might participate at any age is the degree to which he has participated in the past.

A study by Knox and Sjogren (27) demonstrated that adults with recent adult education experience have an

advantage over those who have no recent adult education experience. The learning achievement of recent participants was greater than for adults of equal learning ability, age, and formal education who were nonparticipants.

That which has been stated above regarding the value of past participation as a predictor is in line with Thorndike's (46) observation that neither what people do, nor what they think, nor what they say to others, is a perfect index of their real wants and motives. However, what they do is the best index of the three.

9. Opinions and activities of friends and relatives.--

Bloom (4) proposed that the environment of an individual can be described in terms of those variables which are associated with the development of certain characteristics along a continuum from abundant to deprived. For the present study, it would be of interest to identify those characteristics which vary concomitantly with adult education participation by senior citizens.

If one's friends and relatives place a high value on education, for example, it might be hypothesized that he would be more likely to do so also. If one's friends and associates participate frequently in educational activities, he again might be expected to do so. Knox and Videbeck (28) in their analysis of adult participation proposed that, within the limitations of physical barriers and available opportunities, the individual must select what he wishes to

do. The present study sought to determine the extent to which this selection correlates with certain characteristics of his environment.

On the basis of what has been outlined above, it appears appropriate to hypothesize that friends and relatives would be important sources of encouragement or discouragement with reference to adult education participation. Senior citizens with a favorable view toward education might be expected to seek out friends and associates with similar views. Also it might be expected that the opinions and participation patterns of a senior citizen would be influenced by the opinions and participation patterns of his friends and associates.

Several studies have been conducted testing this general hypothesis as it applies to young people. For example, Wolf (53) and Dave (11) demonstrated the subtle influence of the environment on intelligence and achievement. Hollingshead (20) stated that probably half of the students in the typical college attend that particular institution because of the influence of relatives and friends. Little (34) noted the importance of parental attitudes in determining whether or not young people attend college. His data indicated that college-bound graduates reported strong positive encouragement almost twice as frequently as did those graduates who were not planning to go to college. Johnstone and Rivera (22) suggested the possibility that the emphasis that parents place upon learning affects how far

one goes in formal education and how favorable his attitudes toward education are throughout life. Similar findings have come from the research work of Willerman (51) and Dynes, Clark and Denitz (13). A study in Utah by Christiansen, Cowhig, and Payne (8) reached the same general conclusion regarding the influence of the social environment. The present research tested similar hypotheses relating to the opinions and participation of senior citizens.

In conclusion, it might be pointed out that many studies have been made in the area of adult education participation, and relationships have been noted between this type of participation and numerous independent variables. Very few of these studies have dealt specifically with the aged population, and none of them has considered the relationship between adult education participation and the opinions and participation of one's friends and relatives. The present study was an attempt to partially fill this void in existing adult education research.

Hypotheses Tested

On the basis of the related research mentioned earlier, it was hypothesized that participants in adult education would be differentiated from nonparticipants in the following ways:

- A. They have had more formal education.
- B. They currently hold more organizational memberships.

C. They held more leadership positions in voluntary organizations during the twelve months prior to the interviews.

D. They are more active in community affairs.

E. They perceive the condition of their health to be better.

F. They have had a higher peak annual income during their lifetime.

G. They participated about the same or more in adult education during a similar period ten years ago.

H. They have more favorable views toward educational activities.

I. Their occupation (husband's if homemakers only) at the time of their highest earnings had a higher status.

J. Their chronological age is lower.

K. The perceived views toward educational activities of their friends and relatives are more favorable.

L. The perceived participation in educational activities by their friends and relatives is higher.

M. It was further hypothesized that senior citizens would indicate more interest in nonvocational subjects than in vocational subjects.

Delimitations

The study was limited to the older citizens in Utah County, Utah. Both urban and rural areas were utilized. Those senior citizens who live in homes for the aged,

hospitals, or other similar institutions were excluded from the study. This was done since those residing in such places represent an environment which suggests the need for special consideration of dependency and illness.

Most of the data were obtained from a self report by the respondents. It is assumed that the self reports are substantially accurate. There was no attempt to check the responses for reliability or external validity. However, the following steps were taken to minimize the influence of this limitation:

A. Interviewers sought to establish appropriate rapport with each respondent and encourage him to understand the importance of the project, the desirability of frankness, and the anonymity of his responses.

B. As already indicated, an effort was made to include only those questions which are nonthreatening.

C. Interviewer training included an emphasis on the meaning of each question.

It should be further noted that the information obtained regarding participation was limited to the existing adult education programs in Utah County during the twelve-month period immediately preceding the interviews. It is likely that different program offerings would have attracted participants with somewhat different characteristics. The high cost of experimenting with various curricula makes it impractical to test this supposition. Furthermore, a researcher would find it impossible to control the offerings

of the various adult education agencies of a county. Hence, it seems practical to study adult education participation as it exists even though it must be recognized that the program offerings influence the participation.

Review of Chapters

The report of this study has been divided into four chapters. Chapter II outlines and explains the methods and procedures that were used. Chapter III reviews the most important findings. Chapter IV includes a summary along with the important conclusions and implications of the study.

PREVIEW