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LOW INCOME, ETHNICITY, AND VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION INVOLVEMENT*

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ABSTRACT

Data on voluntary association participation among low-income members of major ethnic groups in the U.S. are reviewed. Low-income blacks are most likely to participate, followed by (2) whites and Mexican Americans and (3) Italian Americans and Puerto Ricans. Reasons for these ethnic differences are considered. More general factors affecting voluntary association patterns of low-income persons are also considered, and a means for increasing their voluntary association involvement is suggested.

Participation in voluntary associations has been shown to have a number of important effects, including increased likelihood of voting and other political activity (e.g., Sallach et al., 1972), acquisition of useful social skills (e.g., Lyden and Thomas, 1969) and development of a more positive self-image (e.g., Aberback, 1969). These effects are especially meaningful for lower income individuals, regardless of ethnicity. In addition, voluntary association activity is generally viewed as a necessary ingredient in community organization.

Williams et al. (1973:637-638) recently noted that "the literature related to the extent of participation among minorities is one of the most confusing." The relatively high participation rate of lower income blacks has been difficult for sociologists to explain, given the repeated research finding that voluntary association rates generally vary directly with income and other measures of socio-economic status.

Voluntary association researchers first suggested that black social participation may be in some measure "compensatory" in nature--reflecting an attempt to fulfill needs which cannot readily be filled in the larger society. According to this theory, those in lower-status positions affiliate and participate in voluntary associations for prestige, ego enhancement, and achievement restricted or denied them in the larger society (Williams et al., 1973:638). A related interpretation, recently suggested by Olsen (1970), is that members of a given ethnic community are brought together in associations as a result of

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heightened mutual awareness and cohesiveness. The latter may be stimulated by pressures exerted against ethnic community members by outsiders. Both the compensatory theory and the ethnic community theory are in opposition to the "isolation theory," which views ethnic group members as essentially marginal in the larger society, unaware of the functions of social participation, and hence unlikely to be association participants.

This paper will first review evidence concerning differential voluntary association involvement among major ethnic groups in American society. The discussion which follows focuses primarily on involvement in associations other than church and unions, since affiliation with these two types of organizations cannot always be viewed as strictly voluntary in nature.

ETHNIC VARIATION IN VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION INVOLVEMENT

Overview of Existing Data

The urban setting generally appears more conducive to involvement in voluntary associations than the rural setting. However, research conducted in metropolitan settings has produced a considerable range in estimates of voluntary association involvement on the part of lower income individuals (and among individuals at higher status levels as well). Much of this variation appears to follow ethnic lines.

Findings since the late 1950's in regard to black/white voluntary association differences suggest that when socio-economic status is taken into account, the rate of affiliation among blacks is at least equal to, and often exceeds, the affiliation rate among whites. Lenski (1961), in his analysis of the impact of religious institutions on secular social institutions in Detroit, found that within each social class black Protestants who were active churchgoers were almost identical in their voluntary association participation (excluding union membership) to white Protestants who were active churchgoers. Correspondingly, black non-churchgoers were almost identical in their participation to white non-churchgoers.

Analysis of a generally low socio-economic area of Long Beach (the lowest on occupation and education levels of nine such areas of grouped census tracts in the metropolitan community--also a very low median family income) indicated that 53% of the blacks and 42% of the whites held membership in at least one voluntary association (church and union memberships included). Limiting the analysis to blue-collar workers in the area, black rates of affiliation with church-related voluntary associations were much higher than white rates. The difference was also rather pronounced for memberships in non-church-related associations (unions included)--38% of blue-collar blacks and 24% of blue-collar whites held such memberships (Dackawich, 1966).

The evidence from these studies is that participation on the part of lower

income blacks exceeds that of lower income whites. More recent research by Orum (1966) and by Olsen (1970) gives a similar picture for voting and political organization membership as well as participation in other voluntary associations. Similarly, Williams et al. (1973) report significantly higher rates of participation in voluntary associations among blacks than among whites who are similar on occupation, education, and other structural characteristics.

Apparently, the tendency for lower income blacks to be more active than lower income whites in voluntary associations has become more pronounced in recent years. Olsen (1970) compared data collected in 1957 for the Detroit Area Study with data taken from the 1967-68 Indianapolis Area Project. In both studies, black participation exceeded white participation when persons of similar socio-economic status were compared; however, Olsen observes that this trend was apparently not as strong in Detroit in 1957 as in Indianapolis in 1968. He suggests that the "ethnic community" interpretation of blacks' voluntary association participation was becoming increasingly relevant by the late 1960's. Olsen also notes support for this thesis in his finding that blacks who identified as members of an ethnic minority tended to participate more actively in associations than non-identifiers. At the same time, Olsen notes support for the "compensatory" explanation of blacks' voluntary association participation in that racial barriers remain a significant fact of American life--informally if not formally. Thus, "...the compensation and ethnic community theses undoubtedly offer complementary, not contradictory, explanations of the tendency for blacks to participate more actively than whites of comparable socioeconomic... levels in many social and political activities..."(Olsen, 1970:696). Williams et al. (1973) concur with Olsen's conclusion

Few data exist for comparing voluntary association involvement of other low-income ethnic group members with involvement of the low-income native white population. Gans'(1962) examination of Italian-American life in Boston's West End, where the socio-economic level was generally low, established that the large majority of residents did not participate in community organizations; apparently, church and peer group adequately served their needs. Puerto Ricans living in Spanish Harlem are described (Sexton, 1965) as rarely participating in the local Civic Association and never in the Council for Community Planning; block clubs, political clubs and unions are described as having been quite unsuccessful in drawing in area residents. However, how these groups compared to low-income whites in the same areas is not known.

Williams et al. (1973) have reported voluntary association data for Mexican Americans and Anglos living in Austin, Texas. Their data indicated that Mexican Americans were not significantly different from Anglos in social participation after variables such as education, occupation, and home ownership were taken

into consideration. A recent study of below-poverty-level families living in both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas found that voluntary association rates among Spanish-speaking families were equal to or higher than the same rates among white families (Kutner, 1974). Thus, the "isolation theory" does not seem applicable to affiliation patterns among Spanish-speaking groups. At the same time, the significantly lower participation rates observed among Mexican Americans as compared to blacks remains a "major problem for future research" according to Williams et al. (1973:644).

Suggested Links Between Ethnicity and Voluntary Association Patterns

Based on the studies of voluntary association participation just reviewed, lower income groups can be ranked from most likely to participate to least likely to participate as follows: 1) blacks, 2) whites and Mexican Americans, 3) Italian Americans and Puerto Ricans.

As noted above, high participation by blacks can be viewed as the joint product of a desire to express ethnic identity (the ethnic community theory) and of a wish to gain access to social, economic and/or political rewards which are otherwise blocked (the compensatory theory). For example, both of these explanations seem to apply to the emergence since 1970 of black Lions clubs in Washington, D.C. Despite the history of a large black population in that city, the emergence of black clubs did not occur until after the city's riot of the late '60's, which signalled heightened ethnic identity. The fact that black membership in the Lions organization is segregated by neighborhood clubs indicates that there is not full access to the "rewards" of service club membership in that metropolitan area.

Lower income whites can be expected to participate in voluntary associations less conspicuously than lower income blacks, having neither the incentive of expressing ethnic identity nor of compensating for societal rewards denied them on the basis of race. On the other hand, Mexican American participation, it seems, should reflect these two incentives. Pride in own ethnic community is a more recent development among the Mexican American population ("La Raza. . .," 1973); Williams et al. (1973) have predicted an increase in this group's voluntary association rates as feelings of ethnic community identification increase. However, because of a number of historical and demographic differences in the relative situation of Mexican Americans and blacks in our society, as well as differences for members of the two groups in ease of "passing" in a predominantly white society, neither the ethnic identity nor the compensatory impetus is likely to be the same for both groups.

Williams et al. (1973) have also predicted an increase in voluntary association participation among Puerto Ricans (and American Indians) if their sense

of ethnic identity increases. As with Mexican Americans, however, it seems unlikely that this group would experience the same incentives to participate as would black Americans of lower income status. In addition, Glazer (1963) observed that for the large Puerto Rican population residing in New York City, an effective substitute for the functions of voluntary associations was the Office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico which organized the city's Puerto Rican community and provided services to it.

Finally, it has been suggested that the needs of Italian Americans in Boston were effectively served by their church and peer group--thus their low level of participation in other community organizations. At this point it seems appropriate to cautiously note the potential significance of the fact that this ethnic group, as well as Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans, are likely to be members of the Catholic Church, which typically demands a high level of religious involvement from its members. According to Marx (1967), however, low religious involvement is likely to characterize blacks who affiliate with militant associations. Thus, Catholicism may provide a significant alternative to ethnic community assertion in the form of joining associations. Greeley (1974:181) has recently asserted that communal participation, i. e., membership in civic organizations, working with others to solve community problems, forming a community organization, etc., is "a specifically Protestant form of political participation."

More general reasons for relatively low voluntary association rates among lower income persons are suggested below.

IF LOWER INCOME INDIVIDUALS DO NOT PARTICIPATE, WHY IS THIS TRUE?

The position taken in this paper is that affiliation with voluntary associations is a complex phenomenon dependent to a certain extent on social and ethnic status but also on a number of other factors. At any level of the social structure it is useful to inquire into the forces discouraging and encouraging social participation. In view of the democratic role in society which voluntary associations are assumed to be capable of playing (e. g., Rose, 1954) and of the relation of voluntary associations to community organization goals, it is especially important to inquire into factors which may act to reduce motivation of lower income individuals to participate in such organizations. As with analysis of migration patterns, a "push-pull" framework seems useful. What is it about the individual that pushes him or creates a desire in him (or, oppositely, stifles desire in him) to affiliate with organizations? At the same time, what does the organization do to make membership and activity especially attractive to him or easier for him?

Lesser ability on the part of lower income individuals to perceive any personally functional significance of membership has rather frequently been

noted. A contributor to a collection of studies on the American workingman sums this up well: "...lower-status individuals knowing less about abstract matters... display less interest in and less desire for changing things... individuals at this stratum do not generally participate for reasons of status aspirations or because of a sense of civic responsibility, but only when they see the necessity for doing so..."(Cousens, 1964:230). At the same time, research by the same writer indicated that reasons such as lack of time and energy were ones frequently verbalized as explanations for non-joining, but more basic reasons included lack of familiarity with the mechanics of becoming affiliated with associations and inability to fully comprehend the stated goals of associations. The latter factors are as much related to insufficient "pull" being exerted by organizations as they are related to personal deficiencies.

Involvement in informal networks of social relationships (with relatives and neighbors) has been shown in some cases to be extensive among the lower strata (e.g., Cohen and Hodges, 1963; Cousens, 1964), and people who share strong family and neighborhood ties may not feel the need to turn to formal organizations. Attitudes existing within the immediate neighborhood concerning the appropriateness of voluntary association involvement may serve as positive or negative "push" factors for lower status individuals as well as for other status levels (Bell and Force, 1956). Limited research on factors related to affiliation by blacks with militant associations suggests the importance of such variables as degree of job support (Ross and Wheeler, 1971) and distinctive features of particular metropolitan centers (McWorter and Crain, 1967) in addition to low religious involvement and ethnic community identification.

Organizations themselves must assume the bulk of responsibility for their success in recruiting members and encouraging widespread activity among members. Blue-collar working-class residents of Detroit gave "never-having-been-asked-to-join" as their main reason for not having joined a block club--an organization supposed to be directly oriented to the local community. Less than 20% of the potential membership were members of school clubs in this same area; parents reported feelings of frustration generated by overly complex programs and by members' apparent lack of interest in them, and the leadership of these clubs apparently could not successfully orient activities to potential members' needs (Cousens, 1964). Unfavorable evaluation of the existing structure of organizations has been reported by other researchers as well. Factory workers in a New England city of 30,000 justified their lack of organization affiliation with the charge that "top cliques" too often dominate organizations in order to promote their own interests (Gordon and Anderson, 1964). Gans (1962) found in Boston that clique domination of organizations did in fact exist in the West End and that, in general, organization membership was attractive only when it

afforded an opportunity for peer group activity not available elsewhere. Similarly, the factory workers in the New England city expressed the conviction that an organization must be composed of the "right crowd" or it is not worth belonging to.

Most importantly, an organization must be perceived an instrumental in meeting at least some needs of potential members. The first groups to achieve any significant level of activity in Spanish Harlem were ones whose main concern centered on economic issues such as obtaining jobs for residents (Sexton, 1965). In Michigan, farmers who were bargaining association members or "potential members" (those who had indicated willingness to sign a contract) were found to be more frequently dissatisfied than were nonjoiners (those unwilling to sign a contract) with their income from farming (McCalla and Feltner, 1967).

In addition to exerting "pull" on potential members, organizations may need to work at ways of insuring that all members are drawn into some degree of activity--e.g., a committee chairmanship within a certain length of time after joining. In the writer's own research on Lions clubs, no less than 46% of the membership of a club had held at least one office, even when the analysis was restricted to members of less than five years who belonged to large clubs (70 or more members) and who were of lower socio-economic status (Gates, 1965). This particular organization thus provides an impressive example of a voluntary association's ability to encourage active participation.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WIDER PARTICIPATION IN VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS AMONG LOWER INCOME INDIVIDUALS AND RELATED IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

Voluntary associations are frequently regarded as crucial vehicles for accomplishing individual, community and societal change. This view of the functions of voluntary associations has been particularly characteristic of governmental and philanthropic programs having the goal of improving the quality of life among disadvantaged population groups.

The specific level of association involvement most conducive to community problem solving has received little research attention, probably because the individual benefits of participation (increased social skills, more positive self-image, etc.) are generally assumed to be so important. The prevailing philosophy has been "the more participants the better." As Specht (1966:78) has pointed out, however, "decision-making, social planning, and social action can involve only a minute portion of any community. Many other means must be established to strengthen the whole fabric of life in low-income communities."

McClure (1974) has recently observed that virtually no attention has been given to the possible relation between neighborhood characteristics and participation in voluntary associations among blacks, and suggests that participation

should be viewed as a result of interaction between specific characteristics of individuals and neighborhoods. One of the most important aspects of black neighborhoods which should be considered, according to McClure, is the extent to which they are heterogeneous or homogeneous in education, income, occupation, and family structure. The former type of neighborhood is frequently created by residential segregation patterns while the latter is best epitomized by the public housing project. A third type of black neighborhood, which might be termed a "neighborhood of choice," is still very rare. The three neighborhood types are likely to differ markedly in voluntary association patterns and community organization goals since their incentives to assert ethnic identity and/or to compensate for various deficiencies are likely to differ.

Assuming that it is desirable for individual or for community development to supplement informal social relationships with at least some involvement in formal associations, a suggestion for increasing involvement among the lower income population can be offered. If organizations furnish sufficient "pull," it is quite possible that individuals who already belong to one or more associations (church, if nothing else)⁴ can be made interested in additional affiliations. Organization goals must be defined and interpreted in terms that are specific and reach lower income individuals on a personal level. Organizations which are oriented to the local community, function to cope with community problems, and, at the same time, remain sufficiently uncomplicated in structure are most likely to be attractive. Such organizations have the potential to generate interest and enthusiasm among lower income persons thereby encouraging them to assume responsibility for problem solving at the local-neighborhood level. Some assistance from professionals and/or agencies outside the community may be needed to locate potential members and to train them for participation and leadership, although this cannot substitute for "grass-roots" involvement and commitment.

FOOTNOTES

1. As used in this paper, the term "involvement" includes both affiliation with, and participation in, voluntary associations. An effort is not made in this paper to separate affiliation and participation or level of activity. Such an effort is not made for two reasons: 1) the literature on voluntary associations does not consistently make this distinction; 2) among lower income individuals, the fact of "being a member" may be as socially significant as active participation at higher income levels.
2. Church and unions are mentioned only when they are not separated from other voluntary association memberships in a particular study, or when membership in these two types of organizations is correlated with member-

- ships in other voluntary associations.
3. Unlike the concentration of blacks in large urban centers, persons of Spanish heritage live in every state of the union. Many in the Southwest are migrant workers. Thousands live in official anonymity, classified as illegal aliens.
 4. Ross and Wheeler (1971) found that church membership was a good predictor of additional memberships among blacks in Tampa, Florida.

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