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## Chapter Three Adult Learners: Who Participates and Why

Adult education is a large and amorphous field of practice, with no neat boundaries such as age, as in the case of elementary and secondary education, or mission, as in higher education. Adult education with its myriad content areas, delivery systems, goals, and learners defies simple categorization. In the previous chapter, we looked at the spectrum of settings where adult learning takes place, ranging from formal institutional settings, to nonformal community-based sites, to one's home, and more recently, to a computer. One way to grasp something of the field is to find out who is involved in the activity itself—hence, studies of participation.

Knowing who participates in adult education activities and why adults are participating (or not) is necessary information for both providers and policymakers. Since participation in adult education is largely a voluntary activity, knowing who is participating, reasons for participating, and what conditions are likely to promote greater participation can help providers better serve adult learners. An understanding of participation patterns can also raise important questions about assumptions underlying what is offered, who is benefiting from participating, and whose needs are *not* being met.

Knowledge about participation is useful to policymakers, particularly in terms of funding. At the federal level, for example, funding for literacy and other programs is a function of who is now participating, in conjunction with the perceived needs of nonparticipants. Along with current numbers and rates of participation of various segments of the adult population, other sociopolitical and economic factors play important parts in federal policy formation,

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not the least of which is the desire to maintain a stable, democratic society and a globally competitive workforce. For those who plan learning activities and instruct adults, it is certainly helpful to know as much as possible about the clientele being served.

This chapter first offers a descriptive profile of who participates in adult learning activities, and the reasons why adults engage in learning. The second half of the chapter problematizes the concept of participation, asking who really has access to learning and who benefits from participating.

## Who Participates?

Almost all studies of participants in adult education focus on formal, institutionally based programs. This, of course, is due to the ease of gathering this information from learners and institutions that sponsor programs. It is much more difficult to assess participation in nonformal, community-based activities or in informal self-directed learning. We first review participation of adults in formal adult education—that is, institutionally sponsored courses or classes. What little we do know about who participates in nonformal and informal learning will be reviewed at the end of this section.

## Johnstone and Rivera's Landmark Study

In 1962 an “inquiry into the nature of adult education in America” was funded by the Carnegie Corporation and carried out by researchers **Johnstone and Rivera (1965)** at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in Chicago. The study sought to describe participation in formal and informal educational activities, assess attitudes and opinions held by adults concerning education, describe the organizations delivering adult education in a typical urban community, and focus on the educational and work experiences of young adults ages seventeen to twenty-four. The findings of this first national study have provided a baseline against which the findings of subsequent studies have been compared.

Since comparisons are made, it is important to know how *adult education* and *adult* are defined in this study. Realizing the import of this function, Johnstone and Rivera (1965, p. 26) struggled to come up with a definition of an adult educational activity that was

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broad enough to capture systematic efforts at learning but not so broad as to include "a host of activities ... which would fall beyond the range of any reasonable or workable definition of adult education." They decided that an adult education activity would have as its main purpose the desire to acquire some type of knowledge, information, or skill and that it would include some form of instruction (including self-instruction). They thus measured involvement as a full-time adult student, as a part-time participant in adult education activities, and as a participant in independent self-education. An adult was defined as anyone either age twenty-one or over, married, or the head of a household. Interviews with a random national sample of nearly twelve thousand households formed the data set.

Using the preceding definitions, **Johnstone and Rivera (1965)** estimated that 22 percent of American adults participated in "one or more forms of learning" between June 1961 and June 1962 (p. 1). They also discovered that what adults were learning was largely practical and skill oriented rather than academic: "Subject matter directly useful in the performance of everyday tasks and obligations accounted for the most significant block of the total activities recorded. Together, the vocational and home and family life categories alone represented 44 percent of all formal courses studied and 47 percent of the subjects people studied on their own" (p. 3).

This landmark study also identified the major demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of participants. Age and formal schooling were delineated as the primary correlates of participation in adult education. Johnstone and Rivera's often-quoted profile of the typical adult learner has held up, with minor deviations, in all subsequent national studies of participation. Their profile is as follows: "The adult education participant is just as often a woman as a man, is typically under forty, has completed high school or more, enjoys an above-average income, works full-time and most often in a white-collar occupation, is married and has children, lives in an urbanized area but more likely in a suburb than large city, and is found in all parts of the country, but more frequently in the West than in other regions" (p. 8).

One of the strengths of Johnstone and Rivera's study is that they included "independent self-education" along with participation in

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formal courses and community-based activities. Unfortunately, with one exception, subsequent national studies have limited participation to organized instruction offered by educational institutions, business or industry, and community organizations.

## National Studies of Formal Participation

Beginning in 1969, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the U.S. Department of Education undertook a set of triennial surveys of participation of adults in education. The results of the first six surveys (1969, 1972, 1975, 1978, 1981, and 1984) and three studies in 1991, 1995, and 1999 can be loosely compared with each other to reveal participation trends. In these surveys, adult education is equated with organized instruction: "Adult education is defined as any course or educational activity taken part-time and reported as adult education by respondents seventeen years old and over" (U.S. Department of Education, 1986). These courses or activities are considered "formal" because they are sponsored by educational institutions or employers. Changes in methodology and sample design over the years warrant caution in making comparisons (Collins, Brick, & Kim, 1997). Nevertheless, certain trends emerge.

One clear trend is that the number of adults participating part-time in organized instruction has increased from a low of 10 percent in the 1969 survey to 14 percent in 1984, 38 percent in 1991, 40 percent in 1995, and 46 percent in 1999 (Kim & Creighton, 2000). In a comparison of the 1991 and 1999 NCES studies, Creighton and Hudson (2002) note an overall increase in participation "among virtually every group of adults" surveyed (p. ix).

The most recent NCES survey of adult education participation was conducted in 2001. As in previous studies, NCES employed a random, national digit dial (RDD) telephone survey of civilian, noninstitutionalized persons ages sixteen and older not enrolled in secondary school at the time of the interview. In this survey, "formal" coursework or training was defined as those activities having an instructor. For the first time, informal educational activities (those that do not involve an instructor) were also surveyed. The results of this study with regard to formal participation are quite congruent with previous national studies (Kim, Collins Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman, 2004). As can be seen in Table 3.1, the overall rate of participation in formal educational activities was

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46 percent. Prior educational attainment, professional or managerial employment status, and household income were all positively related to participation. While in the 1990s surveys there was no significant difference in men and women's participation rates (Valentine, 1997), in this most recent survey, women had a slightly higher participation rate than men (49 versus 43 percent). For overall participation, there were no significant differences among White, Black, or Hispanic learners.

### **Table 3.1. Number of Adults and Rates of Participation in Selected Adult Education Activities, by Selected Demographic, Educational, and Occupational Characteristics, 2000–01.**

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Total Adults (in Thousands)</i>	<i>Overall Participation</i>	
		<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>198,803</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>0.5</i>
<b>Age</b>			
16-30	46,905	53	1.5
31-40	41,778	53	1.4
41-50	41,255	55	1.5
51-65	39,523	41	1.2
66	29,342	22	1.1
<b>Sex</b>			
Male	94,955	43	0.8
Female	103,848	49	0.8
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>			
White, non-Hispanic	144,147	47	0.6
Black, non-Hispanic	22,186	43	1.5
Hispanic	21,537	42	2.3
Other	10,932	49	2.5
<b>Educational attainment</b>			
Less than high school	31,343	22	1.5
High school diploma or its equivalent	64,606	34	0.9
Some college	52,559	58	1.1
Bachelor's degree or higher	50,295	66	1.1
<b>Marital status</b>			
Married	121,455	47	0.7
Living with a partner, unmarried	14,009	43	2.5
Separated/divorced/ widowed	30,503	38	1.3
Never married	32,836	52	1.5

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<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Total Adults (in Thousands)</i>	<i>Overall Participation</i>	
		<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
<b>Employment/occupation</b>			
Employed in the past 12 months	145,249	54	0.7
Professional and managerial	42,230	71	1.1
Service, sales, or support	65,298	55	1.0
Trades	37,722	34	1.3
Not employed in the past 12 months	53,553	25	0.9
<b>Continuing education requirements</b>			
Yes	50,549	64	1.1
No	148,253	40	0.6
<b>Household income</b>			
\$20,000 or less	40,246	28	1.3
\$20,001-\$35,000	38,876	39	1.2
\$35,001-\$50,000	33,035	48	1.5
\$50,001-\$75,000	40,725	56	1.5
\$75,001 or more	45,922	59	1.3
<b>Children under 10 years old in household</b>			
Yes	55,333	52	1.3
No	143,469	44	0.6

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Johnstone and Rivera's profile of the typical adult learner remains apt forty years later. Compared to those who do not participate, participants in adult education are better educated, younger, and employed full-time and have higher incomes. But as Creighton and Hudson (2002, p. ix) point out, "[A] closer look at participation in specific activities reveals some troubling signs of groups being left behind—especially Hispanics, those with lower levels of education, those with lower status jobs, and those who are employed part-time. ... Thus, although the widespread increase in participation in adult education has been accompanied by an elimination of some inequities, in many cases the highly educated and high status groups that have been the traditional beneficiaries of adult education remain the main beneficiaries today."

## Nonformal and Informal Participation

As noted earlier, studies of participation most often focus on formal educational institutions or employer-sponsored programs. Partly because of definitional problems, it has been more difficult to assess participation in nonformal or informal learning activities.

**Hamil-Luker and Uhlenberg (2002)** studied participation in what they termed nonformal adult education activities—those sponsored by community organizations (libraries, neighborhood centers, community groups, religious organizations). Using the NCES databases from 1991 and 1999, they compared participation rates in three categories of provider—credential program (meaning educational institutions), business or industry, and community organizations. With one minor exception, participation increased for all age groups across the three providers. However, "by far the largest increase in adult education occurred in programs provided

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by community organizations, where participation rates more than doubled. Increases in these nonformal educational programs were fairly uniform across the age categories" (p. S327).

The first statistics that we have on informal learning are again from the **Johnstone and Rivera (1965)** study in which they included "self-taught" or independent learning activities. Included almost as an afterthought, the authors admit that the "most surprising" estimate in their study is the "close to nine million persons who were active in independent studies." Further, "the incidence of self-education throughout the adult population is much greater than we had anticipated" (p. 37).

The 2001 NCES study of participation has been the first NCES study to include informal learning in the workplace as one form of participation. "Work-related informal learning activities included supervised training or mentoring, self-paced study using books or videotapes, self-paced study using computers, attending 'brown-bag' or informal presentations, attending conferences or conventions, and reading professional journals or magazines" (**Kim et al., 2004**, p. vi). An astounding 63 percent of adults reported participating in informal workplace learning. However, as with the overall participation profile, "those adults with some college or more education, those in professional or managerial occupations, and those with higher household incomes were generally more likely to participate in work-related informal learning activities" (p. xii). But unlike participation in formal education, males participated more than females (67 versus 59 percent) and Whites more than Hispanics (no significant differences were observed when comparing Black adults with White or Hispanic adults).

Although most adult educators suspect that the majority of adult learning is informal—that is, embedded in everyday life—it is particularly difficult to measure because most adults themselves have trouble identifying these episodes. One mechanism for assessing participation in informal learning has been through studies of self-directed learning. For example, **Penland (1979)** was interested in corroborating **Tough's (1971)** findings that more than 90 percent of adults are engaged in independent learning projects (see **Chapter Five**). Briefly, Tough felt that adults were engaged in learning as part of their everyday lives—learning that was not necessarily institutionally based and not easily recognized by the learners

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themselves because of the association of learning with formal instruction. Consequently, Tough and Penland asked adults to think about major learning activities that were clearly focused efforts to gain and retain knowledge or skill. A learning project had to have occurred over at least a two-day period, totaling at least seven hours of learning. Respondents in both studies were given a list of things people learn about—a foreign language, gardening, raising children, and so on. Penland's 1,501 respondents were selected from the U.S. population by means of a modified probability sample. He found that “almost 80 percent (78.9) of the population of eighteen years and over perceive themselves as continuing learners whether in self-planned or formal courses” and “over three-quarters (76.1 percent) of the U.S. population had planned one or more learning projects on their own” (p. 173). Furthermore, of the nine areas of study, personal development and home and family ranked highest in popularity, followed by hobbies and recreation, general education, job, religion, voluntary activity, public affairs, and agriculture or technology.

In summary, the answer to the question of who participates in adult learning activities depends on whether we are talking about formal, nonformal, or informal settings. For formal adult education, participation rates have steadily increased to a high of 46 percent recorded in the recent NHES study of 2001. Further, the profile of the typical adult learner in formal, instructor-led educational or training activities has remained remarkably consistent across studies. We have much less data on participation in nonformal and informal adult education; however, what we do have suggests very high rates of participation. Next we discuss why adults do or do not choose to participate in learning activities.

## Why Adults Do or Do Not Participate

Adults are busy people. Most spend at least eight hours a day working and often as many hours attending to family, household, and community concerns. Why do literally millions of these adults enroll in adult education classes, seek private instruction, or engage in independent learning projects? Teachers, counselors, administrators, and policymakers all have a keen interest in understanding why people do or do not participate in learning activities.

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One approach to answering this question is to ask people their reasons for participating, and this has been done as part of the national survey studies already cited. Another approach is to try to determine the underlying motivational orientations or barriers to participation of certain groups of learners. These approaches are discussed in the following paragraphs.

## Survey Studies

Hundreds of local, state, and national studies have asked adults their reasons for engaging in educational pursuits. In most of these studies, respondents are presented with a list of reasons why people might participate in organized learning activities and asked to indicate which ones apply to them. Most respondents report multiple reasons. If asked to indicate the *main* reason (as they were in the NCES surveys), however, they most commonly cite job-related motives.

The strength of employment-related motives was first uncovered by **Johnstone and Rivera (1965)**. Thirty-six percent of respondents indicated that they were "preparing for a new job or occupation" (p. 144), and 32 percent said they participated in education "for the job I held at that time." The authors concluded that "vocational goals most frequently direct adults into continuing education" (p. 144). The nine surveys of participation conducted by the NCES have consistently revealed job-related reasons as the most frequently cited.

In a study conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; **Valentine, 1997**), fully 90.6 percent of those surveyed in the United States cited career- or job-related reasons for participation and 9.4 percent cited "personal interest." When asked about the goal of the learning activity, the largest percentage (58 percent) said it was professional or career upgrading, 18.3 percent "other," 17.6 percent to earn a college or university degree, 3.8 percent to earn a vocational or apprenticeship certificate, and 2.3 percent to complete secondary school (**Valentine, 1997**). Clearly, there is a strong linkage between one's work life and participation in adult education.

Approaching people's reasons for participating in adult education from a somewhat different angle, **Aslanian and Brickell (1980)** sought to test the hypothesis that life transitions motivate adults to

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seek out learning experiences. Of the 1,519 adults over age twenty-five randomly sampled, 744, or 49 percent, reported having learned something formally or informally in the year prior to the study. They found that 83 percent of the learners in their sample could describe some past, present, or future change in their lives as reasons for learning. The other 17 percent were engaged in learning for its own sake—that is, to stay mentally alert—or for the social aspects or because learning is a satisfying activity. Those going through transitions, such as marriage, retirement, job changes, birth of children, and so on, were able to identify specific events, such as getting fired or promoted, that triggered their transition. The authors noted seven kinds of transitions. Those relating to career and family accounted for 56 percent and 16 percent of the transitions, respectively. The other transitions, in descending importance, concerned leisure (13 percent), art (5 percent), health (5 percent), religion (4 percent), and citizenship (1 percent). “To know an adult’s life schedule,” the authors conclude, “is to know an adult’s learning schedule” (pp. 60–61).

In a similarly designed study, **Aslanian (2001)** also found that participation in higher and continuing education is largely due to a life transition. Of seven possible transitions, 85 percent named a career transition as their reason for wanting to learn, and hence participate, in higher and continuing education courses.

The survey studies have been helpful in identifying the reasons adults give for participating in learning activities. Since the majority of adult learners are employed (only 25 percent of adults surveyed in the 2001 NCES study had not been employed in the twelve months prior to the survey) and derive much of their identity from their work, it is not surprising to find that at least half of them are involved in education for job-related reasons. Other investigations have sought to go beyond these self-reported data in trying to understand the why of participation.

## Motivational Orientations of Learners

Interest in categorizing the various reasons given for participating in adult learning has spurred a line of inquiry in addition to the survey studies. This area of investigation was initiated with the publication by Houle of *The Inquiring Mind* in 1961. Choosing a small,

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select sample of twenty-two adults "conspicuously engaged in various forms of continuing learning" (1961/1988, p. 13), Houle conducted in-depth interviews that explored his subjects' history of learning, factors that led them to be continuing learners, and their views of themselves as learners. An analysis of the interview data revealed three separate learning orientations held by the adults. The now-famous typology consists of goal-oriented learners, who use education as a means of achieving some other goal; activity-oriented learners, who participate for the sake of the activity itself and the social interaction; and learning-oriented participants, who seek knowledge for its own sake.

Houle's research stimulated a number of studies attempting to affirm or refine the original typology. By far the most extensive work has been done with Boshier's forty-eight item Education Participation Scale (EPS), later refined to forty-two items (Boshier, 1991). Factor analysis of the forty-two items suggests the following seven factors, each containing six items: communication improvement of verbal and written skills; social contact, meaning meeting people and making friends; educational preparation, the remediation of past educational deficiencies; professional advancement, concerned with improving job status or moving to a better one; family togetherness, concerned with bridging generation gaps and improving relationships in families; social stimulation, meaning escaping boredom; and cognitive interest, seeking knowledge for its own sake (Boshier, 1991).

Boshier himself conducted an extensive test of Houle's typology using his EPS scale (Boshier & Collins, 1985). Using cluster analysis instead of factor analysis, because the technique is more congruent with Houle's original conceptualization of three separate but overlapping orientations, he analyzed the responses of 13,442 learners from Africa, Asia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. Boshier and Collins were able to effect a three-cluster solution "loosely isomorphic with Houle's topology" (p. 125). They found that "Cluster I consisted of the Cognitive Interest items and was congruent with his [Houle's] learning orientation." Cluster II, the activity orientation, "was multifaceted and composed of items normally labeled Social Stimulation, Social Contact, External Expectations, and Community Service" (p. 125). Cluster III consisted of the Professional Advancement items and thus

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resembled Houle's goal orientation. The authors note that although their three-cluster solution is "loosely isomorphic," the grouping of items to make up the activity cluster that matches Houle's typology is "overly generous." They conclude that "Houle's intuition has been partly collaborated; two of the six clusters were as he described them" (p. 127).

Using Boshier's EPS, **Fujita-Starck (1996)** analyzed responses from 1,142 students in programs at a large state university. Results confirmed the seven-factor typology proposed by Boshier in 1991 (communication improvement, social contact, educational preparation, professional advancement, family togetherness, social stimulation, and cognitive interest). The author also found the scale to be reliable "in differentiating among a diverse group of students with varying reasons for participating in continuing education" (p. 38).

Despite the limitations of this line of research (**Courtney, 1992**), it has become evident that learners' motivations for participating in adult education are many, complex, and subject to change. The search for an underlying motivational structure related to participation is likely to continue, however, for such knowledge "can assist educators and administrators in identifying and meeting the needs of a wide spectrum of learners relative to program content, as well as the time, duration, and location of related activities" (**Fujita-Starck, 1996**, p. 39).

## Barriers to Participation

Knowing why adults participate in formal adult education does not tell us why many do not. That is, we cannot assume that those who are not participating are happily employed and satisfied with their family, community, and leisure activities. In fact, one of the field's biggest mysteries is why more adults, especially those who might benefit the most, are not involved in adult education. This question has prompted research into why adults do not participate in adult education.

The two most often cited reasons for nonparticipation are lack of time and lack of money. These are socially acceptable reasons for not doing something, of course, and probably very legitimate reasons for adults who are busy people trying to become or stay economically solvent and take care of their families and themselves.

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**Johnstone and Rivera (1965)** in their national study of participation found that 43 percent cited cost as a reason for not attending adult education courses and 39 percent said they were too busy. These were also the two main reasons for nonparticipation cited in the UNESCO study (**Valentine, 1997**). Forty-five percent of respondents said lack of time was a barrier for job-related education; this figure climbs to 60.1 percent for non-job-related education. Interestingly, 33.4 percent gave cost as a barrier for job-related education, but 25.4 percent reported cost as a barrier for non-job-related education (**Valentine, 1997**). For both types of education, "family responsibilities" was cited as the next most salient barrier.

Reasons why adults do not participate have been clustered by several researchers into types of barriers. **Johnstone and Rivera (1965)** clustered ten potential barriers into two categories: external, or situational, and internal, or dispositional, barriers. External barriers are "influences more or less external to the individual or at least beyond the individual's control" (p. 214), such as cost of the program. Internal barriers reflect personal attitudes, such as thinking one is too old to learn. Older adults, for example, cited more dispositional barriers, and younger people and women were more constrained by situational barriers. In contrast, **Valentine's (1997)** analysis of the UNESCO data revealed that situational barriers affected both men and women: "Women were more likely than men to report that family responsibilities interfered with both job-related and non-job-related education. Men were more likely than women to report that work demands interfered with non-job-related education" (p. 107).

**Darkenwald** and colleagues have gone beyond the three-part or four-part barrier typologies in developing a scale of deterrents to participation that can be factor-analyzed to reveal the structure of reasons underlying nonparticipation (in much the same way the EPS does for participation). A form of the Deterrents to Participation Scale (DPS) used with the general adult public revealed six factors of nonparticipation: lack of confidence, lack of course relevance, time constraints, low personal priority, cost, and personal problems (such as child care, family problems, and personal health; **Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985**). In a later analysis of the same data, **Valentine and Darkenwald (1990)** derived a typology of adult nonparticipants. According to their analysis, the adult

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nonparticipants in the general public cluster into five distinct groups. People are deterred from participating by personal problems, lack of confidence, educational costs, lack of interest in organized education generally, or lack of interest in available courses.

## Adding a Sociological Lens to Explanations of Participation

Viewing participation from the perspective of barriers lends another dimension to the field's attempt to understand why some adults participate in adult education and others do not. But this perspective tells only part of the story. The bulk of research in North America on nonparticipation has been from the perspective of the individual's motivation, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, position in the life cycle, and so on. This has not always been the case, however, as **Courtney (1992)** points out in his historical analysis of participation research. Prior to the 1960s, a popular topic among researchers was social participation. General social participation refers to the extent to which a person is an active participant in family and community life; participating in adult education activities was considered just one component of social participation. **Benn (1997)** has revisited this notion of social participation in a survey study of 259 adults in a range of educational programs. She concludes that the extent of one's general social activity affects learning activity, a finding that has implications for marketing and recruitment: "Rather than blanket publicity, a more effective approach might be to advertise through social groups and organizations. Adult education does not choose its students, they choose (or do not choose) adult education" (p. 34).

For some, a combination of psychological and social factors act as a barrier to participation. **Rubenson (1998, p. 259)** points out that "only when we include structural factors and analyze the interaction between them and the individual conceptual apparatus does an interpretation become possible. Adults' readiness to learn and barriers preventing it ... can be understood in terms of societal processes and structure, institutional processes and structure and individual consciousness and activity." **Hall and Donaldson's (1997)** study of why women without a high school diploma chose not to participate provides examples of how the social and the psychological

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interact. Preadult factors such as parents' education, early pregnancies, and economic status formed part of the picture. Lack of a support system was a second factor. Conventional barriers such as lack of time, information, and child care were also operative. The fourth dynamic Hall and Donaldson termed *lack of voice*: "At the heart of nonparticipation lies a 'deterrent' so deeply embedded in some women that no theory can fully capture its meaning. The way a woman feels about herself, her self-esteem and self-confidence, and the way she can express herself are significant elements in her decision about whether to participate in adult education" (p. 98).

Since the early 1990s the field of adult education has become much more conscious of the impact of sociocultural factors on shaping participation in adult education. Rubenson (1998, p. 261) characterizes this approach to participation as consisting of two dimensions—"the long arm of the family as reflected in the relationship between social background, educational attainment and participation ... and the long arm of the job: the increased importance of adult education and training as investment." Using data collected in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) from ten countries, **Boudard and Rubenson (2003)** predicted that literacy skills would determine participation in adult education and training. Instead, they found educational attainment to be "the most important single factor predicting participation in adult education and training" (p. 279). Further analyses revealed that "readiness to learn is formed early in life and further developed through educational and work experiences ... the long arm of the family and the long arm of the job" (p. 279).

An even more recent analysis of participation in the United Kingdom (**Gorard & Selwyn, 2005**) found that participation could be predicted from variables "we could have known when each person was born"; in particular, "the influence of parental background is key" (p. 79). The authors point out that "where individuals create, for themselves and through their early experiences, a 'learner identity' inimical to further study, then the prospect of learning can become a burden rather than an investment for them" (p. 71).

Race, class, gender, ethnic group, and so on can also act as barriers to participation. **Sissel's (1997)** study of parent involvement in Head Start programs found that "power relations were expressed in the withholding or allocation of programmatic resources, and functioned to either impede or promote participation" (p. 123).

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She recommends that more research be conducted on “specific structural factors” (such as race and gender) that “enhance or impede participation” (p. 135). **Davis-Harrison (1996)** also found race and class to be important variables in investigating the nonparticipation of blue-collar male workers.

Working from this same critical perspective, **Jarvis (1985)** makes the case for a class analysis in that the middle-class bias found in all studies of participation can be explained by the idea that adult education is organized by the middle class, and the presentation of knowledge is middle class in both language and content. Furthermore, previous school experiences select out “those who were labeled as successful in education” (p. 204), and those who will be labeled successful is pretty much predetermined by one's class, age, sex, and educational background. Jarvis would concur with **McClenaghan (2000)** that one's “social capital”—how one is positioned in society in terms of “the totality of actual and potential resources individuals can mobilise through membership in organisations and social networks” (p. 568)—can help explain differing levels of participation in both formal and informal adult education.

Finally, two studies examined how the social structure determines participation. **Nordhaug (1990)** examined participation in Norwegian adult education not from the individual participant's perspective but from macrolevel variables over which individuals have no control, such as material resources and population density related to the structure of municipalities. He found that the amount of educational resources (as measured by the community's level of educational attainment) was “the most efficient predictor of adult education activity ... on a regional level” (p. 205). In a U.S. study, **Jung and Cervero (2002)** used national data sets on postsecondary education to determine which contextual variables in each of the fifty U.S. states would best predict the rate of participation of adults in higher education. Out of eleven variables, the two best predictors of adult participation in a state's higher education system were availability of undergraduate education (number of seats available, public and private) and educational attainment of the state's adult population (percentage of adults with high school or higher).

In summary, looking at social structure rather than individual needs and interests reveals some very different explanations as to why adults do or do not participate in adult learning activities.

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These competing perspectives imply different strategies for increasing participation. If individual interests and motivation account for participation, then recruitment efforts would center on responding to an adult's perceived learning needs and stimulating motivation. If, in contrast, participation or nonparticipation is seen as a function of the social structure, then one would work toward changing aspects of this structure in ways that would facilitate participation. The most robust explanation of participation is likely to be found in considering both the psychological and sociological perspectives.

## Problematizing the Concept of Participation

Most of what we have presented thus far on participation reflects what we know about who participates and the reasons for participating (or not) in mostly formal adult education. In this section of the chapter we stand back and question some of the assumptions that underlie the dominant discourse of participation. As **Crowther (2000)** points out, this discourse has been narrowly conceived around four assumptions: (1) participation is a good thing; (2) participation equals formal learning; (3) learners are abstract, not socialized, individuals; and (4) there are barriers to participation, not resistance. We take each one of these assumptions in turn to critique the concept of participation.

## Participation Is a Good Thing

Studies of participation assume that everyone should want to engage in adult education because it is a good thing to do. Underlying many of the stated purposes of adult education in America is the assumption that the ideal of a democratic society must be maintained, and that education is one way to do this. Individualism, independence, and a Protestant-capitalist work ethic frame the actual provision of adult education in America. Further, because this is a democratic society, all individuals have access and the opportunity to benefit through education. As Lindeman (1926/1989) proposed early in the founding of the field, adult education had a dual purpose of improving both society and the individual. In practice, however, a case can be made that education

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is "an apparatus for social control" (Cunningham, 1988, p. 133) rather than empowerment, and that adult education in the United States is elitist and exclusionary. As evidence of adult education's elite bias, Cunningham points to middle-class participation patterns, the homogeneous, technically oriented training of adult educators, the "psychology of individual deficit" that serves as a basis for explaining social inequities, and the erosion of the voluntary nature of adult education.

Most societies in fact use education to preserve the status quo rather than to bring about change or address inequities. In reviewing the common functions of adult education, Jarvis (1985) points out how they can be used in the service of maintaining the status quo. Adult education maintains the social system and existing social relations because "the education of adults transmits the dominant culture and in the process it reproduces the cultural system which, in itself, is a force for the retention of the status quo rather than social change" (p. 139). Individual advancement and selection, while appearing to develop individuals, is actually a selective process carefully monitored by the system itself. Another function—offering a second chance and legitimization—also promotes the dominant culture since "second chance education actually produces an appearance of greater equality of opportunity and, hence, reinforces the existing social structures" (p. 143). Even leisure-time pursuits have as a latent function "the retention of stability in the social system at a time when many people do not have work to occupy their time and their minds" (p. 147). Finally, development and liberation can be goals of adult education, although one should be aware that such development and liberation may actually be designed to enable people to fit more easily into the existing social system.

The problems to which adult educators respond tend to be identified by those who have a value perspective not necessarily shared by the target population. As Cunningham (1988, p. 141) has noted, much program planning is based on an individual deficit model rather than an examination of "the oppressive structures in which people live." Programs are thus designed around learner deficiencies that may or may not be of concern to the learner. What is necessary, Cunningham and others assert, is for socially responsible adult educators to become aware of the "social as well as personal dimensions of learning and the capacity of education to respond" (Cunningham, 2000, p. 574). Cunningham goes on to point out that

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“if one conceptualized any nation as composed of the state (governmental sector), civil society (voluntary sector), and the market (economic sector), then how these sectors are related and how education serves these sectors become critical questions in understanding the relationships between adult education and society” (p. 574).

Nevertheless, “adult education is given public support when the public can see the connection between education and the solution to a threatening situation” (Griffith & Fujita-Starck, 1989, p. 172). Most “threatening” are challenges to economic stability and social order. The emphasis may shift with changes in society’s social, cultural, and economic structures. Literacy education in colonial America was invested in for a greater religious purpose; this gave way to a citizenship orientation in the wake of independence during the mid-eighteenth century, which in turn was eclipsed by vocational training and immigrant education at the turn of the twentieth century.

In light of the social forces documented in **Chapter One**—demographics, economics, and technology—the purposes of adult education today for which there is public support cluster around the United States sustaining a competitive edge in a global economy. This translates into preparing and then maintaining an informed and efficient workforce. Along with this economic imperative is the assumption that social stability is both a product and a goal of adult education and training. Thousands of restless, illiterate, unemployed, or underemployed adults pose a threat to the stability of the social order, not to mention a drain on social resources. So although the rhetoric of adult education suggests some rather lofty ideals for the purpose of the endeavor, the reality suggests a more conservative purpose: maintenance of the status quo, which today means a capitalist economic system that values individuality, independence, and entrepreneurialism. Thus we see a growing emphasis on human resource development and training, continued provision for basic skill acquisition, and ever-expanding postsecondary opportunities for adults.

## Participation Equals Formal Learning

In writing this chapter on participation we would have liked to present as comprehensive a picture as possible. However, as we stated earlier, nearly all of the studies are of participation in

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formal institutionally sponsored programs. Yet we know that adults engage in learning activities sponsored by community-based nonformal groups. Further, adults learn informally on their own. Even in business and industry it has been estimated that upwards of 70 percent of learning in the workplace is informal (**Bruce, Aring, & Brand, 1998**).

What accounts for this bias in participation studies? It has to do in part with the ease of collecting information from educational institutions; in part it is due to adult learners themselves not recognizing the informal learning embedded in their everyday lives. And certainly the bias in part has to do with policy and funding. While the field is proud of its service orientation and the voluntary nature of participation, in reality what is offered cannot be uncoupled from the question of who finances the various adult learning opportunities. And the answer to this question of who finances adult education is easier to find in reference to formal adult education.

In North America, there are many providers of formal learning opportunities, including government at all levels, employers, educational institutions, and community institutions such as libraries. Because much of the expenditure for this form of learning is hidden under a variety of budgetary labels—at one time more than 270 federal programs alone had some adult learning component (**Griffith & Fujita-Starck, 1989**)—it is difficult to measure the relative financial power of various providers.

To complicate the matter, what is offered at any particular time “will almost inevitably relate to the pressures generated in the social system. Social pressures act in such a manner as to create an imbalance in the system to which institutions, other than that generating pressure, respond by seeking to restore the system to some form of equilibrium” (**Jarvis, 1986, p. 57**). Institutions are currently being pressured to respond to the issues of an increasingly diverse workforce, technological obsolescence, and health threats such as AIDS. This notion of mobilizing institutions in the service of maintaining social equilibrium is but one explanation for the shifts in curriculum emphasis.

**Crowther (2000)** points out that it could be argued that the monopoly of formal adult education is being challenged “by developments in experiential learning, the growth of new educational technologies, distance learning and procedures such as the accreditation of prior learning” (p. 485). He goes on to ask, “Are these not

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examples of a more democratic, pluralistic, learning process which both facilitates access and disperses control over the curriculum?" (p. 485). However, these mechanisms of dealing with and recognizing informal experiential learning can also be seen as "reaffirming, rather than undermining, the dominant assumptions about control over definitions of educationally relevant knowledge" (p. 485). In other words, when the recognition of informal learning is tied to the formal system as in accreditation of prior learning, control still rests with the system that has predetermined what counts as learning. That the formal system will serve its own interests is underscored by an interesting article in *Training & Development* about "free agent learners" (Caudron, 1999). Acknowledging the rise of employees learning on their own, Caudron warns that "companies have to be willing to accept the new ideas such employees are bringing to work" and that "free agent learners threaten corporate governance because the more that people learn, the more competent and confident they become" (p. 30).

Participation equals formal learning because of ease of measurement but also because the formal system controls what gets "counted" as adult education. In a pluralistic society such as ours, there is no single answer to the question of who decides what learning opportunities to offer. In reality, for formal learning programs at least, decisions are made by those who pay—whether that means the learners themselves, government, employers, or educational institutions. And those who pay are in positions of power to determine which social pressures will be addressed and how those responses will be structured. Those not in positions of power rarely decide what learning opportunities are offered. Their role is limited to deciding whether to participate.

## Learners Are Abstract, Not Socialized, Individuals

As we have already noted in this chapter, the predominate view of adult learner participation is through the lens of individual learners who have chosen to participate in a learning activity. Much of the discourse on participation explains nonparticipation from an individual deficit stance—that is, there is something wrong with or deficient about nonparticipants or they would be clamoring to be

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in our adult education programs. Further, these nonparticipants are probably most in need of what adult education has to offer.

This discourse fails to take into account the sociocultural context of adult learners and the structural characteristics of the adult education enterprise itself. Although we have addressed some of these factors in the preceding section, "Adding a Sociological Lens to Explanations of Participation," there is more that can be said about this major misconception about participation.

The democratic ideals of equal opportunity and open access make the current reality of uneven and unequal participation in formal adult learning particularly worrisome to some policymakers, educators, and researchers. Most explanations focus on a person's stated reasons for nonparticipation, such as cost, time, transportation, and lack of confidence. When viewed from a social perspective, other explanations emerge. Rubenson (1989, p. 64) argues, for example, that "through socialization within the family, the school, and, later on, in working life, a positive disposition towards adult education becomes a part of some group's habitus but not of others."

Those adults who have been socialized into valuing and acquiring the attitudes and skills of the middle class will be the ones to take advantage of learning opportunities. Since most providers of such opportunities are themselves middle-class, little effort is expended trying to understand and provide for other populations. The modus operandi of most providers is to offer a set of activities that they assume learners will want. A response, however, is predicated on the assumptions that learners know about the program, can attend at the time it is offered, and can afford it; that the subculture of the institution is conducive to their own; and that what is offered corresponds with what they need (Jarvis, 1985). Rubenson (1989, p. 65) argues that "a system of adult education that implicitly takes for granted that the adult is a conscious, self-directed individual in possession of the instruments vital to making use of the available possibilities for adult education—a system that relies on self-selection to recruit the participants—will by necessity widen, not narrow, the educational and cultural gaps in society."

There are other reasons why certain adults have more access to learning opportunities than other adults. Where one happens to live, what one's primary language is, what color, age, or sex one

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happens to be, what one does for a living all contribute to the participation pattern in adult education. Cropley (1989, p. 146) calls these factors "framework conditions," which "are largely a function of the circumstances in which people live, especially of factors such as the values, attitudes, habits, priorities and the like of the social groups to which they belong, the economic structure of their society, even features of the education system itself." The result is that "some individuals are more equal than others in the choices available to them" (p. 146).

By way of illustrating how these framework conditions can determine who is more likely to benefit from adult learning opportunities, where and how one lives make a difference. It is common knowledge that there is less accessibility in rural areas than in urban or suburban centers. The picture is a bit more complicated than just a rural-urban split, however. Those in small-town rural areas are better off than those living in isolated areas, and some urban centers are as impoverished as the most rural areas. Worldwide, access to learning opportunities in rural areas is a problem at all levels of education. Further, there are those who lack a geographical place altogether—migrant, transient, homeless, and refugee populations. Migrants, for example, "are the most undereducated major subgroup in the United States, with a high school dropout rate larger than that of any other group. Their mobility, their language differences, and the cultural differences experienced as they move from one community to another combine with health and nutritional problems to negatively affect school achievement. Migrant lifestyles revolve around working, moving on to find other work, and working again" (Velazquez, 1996, p. 28). For any of these geographically mobile groups, there is little more than sporadic access to education or social services.

Age is another condition that often determines who benefits from learning opportunities. Older adults not only have the lowest levels of participation in adult education generally (Creighton & Hudson, 2002) but also receive far less training in the workplace than younger workers. In some settings and in other parts of the world, age in combination with gender makes for another condition affecting access. For example, in the United States, since managerial and professional workers and all nonmanual workers

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receive more training than manual workers—and women are underrepresented in these positions—women, and older women in particular, are much less likely to receive employer-sponsored training than are men (Stacy & To, 1994).

## There Are Barriers, Not Resistance

Readers will recall that there is a section of this chapter on barriers to participation. In that section we reviewed the studies that identify personal barriers such as lack of interest, personal problems, thinking one is too old to learn, and so on as well as situational barriers such as lack of time and money. We also pointed out that the individual's motivation, beliefs, and behaviors and life situation explain only part of the picture. Social structural factors such as family of origin, class, race, and so on shape one's level of participation in formal adult education.

What **Crowther (2000)** is proposing from a critical theory perspective is that nonparticipation can be construed as an act of resistance. Rather than being prevented from participating because of some insurmountable barrier, the learner chooses not to participate—that is, resistance is a matter of deliberate choice. While resistance has been studied more frequently with secondary school populations, several adult educators have written about this phenomenon, especially in reference to literacy education (**Belzer, 2004; Quigley, 1990; Sandlin, 2000**).

In summarizing this notion of nonparticipation as resistance rather than barriers, Crowther (2000, pp. 489–490) writes:

It seems reasonable to surmise that many people find adult education unattractive and irrelevant to their daily lives. Despite many well intentioned efforts to attract people the sense of frustration felt by their failure to respond to what is offered is often evident. It is easy thereafter to assume people are “apathetic” and have limited horizons. Redefining nonparticipation as a form of resistance may, however, open up the possibility of rethinking what adult education is for and where it occurs. ... If we started to think about participation in these terms then the problem of participation could be faced the right way round—that is, that adult education is part of the problem rather than simply the solution.

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## Summary

Participation is one of the more thoroughly studied areas in adult education. We have a sense of who participates, what is studied, and what motivates some adults and not others to enroll in a course or undertake an independent learning project.

Although there were numerous small-scale studies of participation in the forty years between the inauguration of the field of adult education and the 1960s, it was not until 1965 that the first national study of participation was published. Johnstone and Rivera's study, with its care in defining participation and selecting methods of data collection and analysis, remains a benchmark contribution to this literature. Subsequent surveys by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and UNESCO (**Valentine, 1997**) have contributed to this database. Regardless of the study, the profile of the typical adult learner in formal educational activities remains remarkably consistent: white, middle-class, employed, younger, and better educated than the nonparticipant. Further, employment-related reasons account for the majority of participant interest in continuing education.

Why adults do or do not participate in adult education is an important question, having implications for both theory and practice. Surveys have uncovered both reasons for, and barriers to, participation. The work on determining an underlying structure of motivational orientations begun by Houle (1961/1988) has been carried on most notably by Boshier's research using the Educational Participation Scale (EPS). Further, explanations of participation have been advanced from a sociological rather than a psychological perspective. In these analyses, people's decisions to participate have less to do with their needs and motives than with their position in society and the social experiences that have shaped their lives.

Finally, we "problematized" the current understanding of participation by questioning and critiquing four assumptions about participation presented by **Crowther (2000)**. These four assumptions are that participation is a good thing, that participation equals formal learning, that learners are abstract, not socialized individuals, and that there are barriers, not resistance, to participating in formal adult learning activities.