
THE PARTICIPATION LITERATURE

The literature on participation generally falls into two categories: empirical studies describing patterns of participation behavior, and theoretical studies seeking to explain that behavior. Both types of studies provide important insights into participation behavior; neither, however, directly addresses the issues facing arts institutions as they attempt to design and implement effective participation-building strategies. This chapter summarizes the key features of the research literature, highlights the key findings, and discusses why the literature fails to provide the needed information.

Before we begin with these topics, however, two definitional issues must be resolved: How do we define participation in the arts? And what activities do we include in our definition of the arts?

Although participation in the arts is sometimes discussed as though it were a homogeneous phenomenon, it can take several forms. Individuals may participate in a “hands-on” way—e.g., by singing in a choir or painting a picture. They may also participate through attendance—e.g., by going to a ballet or visiting an art museum. And they may participate through the media—e.g., by listening to an opera on the radio, playing a jazz CD, or watching a play on television. Separating the three ways of participating is important. Consider, for instance, that according to the empirical literature, more people participate in the arts through the media than through attendance, and many more participate through attendance than through hands-on engagement (National Endowment for the Arts, 1998; Americans for the Arts, 1996). As we document in Chapter Five, arts institutions’ missions and ways of interacting with participants often differ. All institutions are interested in increasing attendance, and many are likely to be interested in providing opportunities to involve people with the arts in a hands-on way,¹ but participation in the arts through the media is less

¹Several of the institutions we interviewed placed a very high priority on getting participants directly involved in the arts creation process.

directly relevant to their participation-building activities. In other words, these three forms of participation are not equally relevant to arts institutions trying to increase public involvement in their activities.

As for how we define the arts, that, of course, is considerably more problematic than defining participation in that it involves aesthetic and philosophical questions well beyond the scope of our research. It is important to note, however, that which activities are included in this definition directly affects estimates of participation levels (Walker et al., 2000; AMS, 1995; Robinson, 1993) and may affect the individual's decisionmaking process as well. There is no consensus on which types of art activities should be included. There is general agreement about the so-called classic arts—opera, ballet, dance, theater, classical music, painting and sculpture, and literature—but the same cannot be said for the more popular art forms, such as rock and roll, hip-hop, and activities provided by the commercial entertainment industries (film, radio, and television). There is also no consensus on whether to include amateur arts and crafts. The estimates of participation levels cited in this report are based on the definitions of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA).

EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

Much of the empirical literature is based on analyses of individual survey data—in particular, NEA's SPPA (National Endowment for the Arts, 1997).² This literature principally focuses on three aspects of participation behavior: levels of participation, characteristics of participants, and the reasons people cite for their participation.

Levels of Participation

The arts are a popular leisure time activity for a large proportion of the population. According to the most recent survey data (National Endowment for the Arts, 1998), about 50 percent of all adults in the United States attended a performance in one of seven performing arts (jazz, classical music, opera, musicals, nonmusical plays, ballet, and other dance) or visited an art museum in the preceding year.³ Although the attendance rates for this form of participation are

²The Harris poll surveys conducted for Americans for the Arts (Americans for the Arts, 1996) provide a second major source of survey data on arts participation at the individual level. The SPPA data are used more frequently because, compared to the Harris poll survey data, they contain a broader range of information about individuals and their participation.

³The participation data cited here are reported in NEA's report on the latest SPPA (National Endowment for the Arts, 1998).

below those for more popular forms of entertainment—such as watching television (which is virtually universal) and attending films—they nonetheless compare favorably with those for such other leisure time activities as attending sports events or going to an amusement park.

The survey data also show that over three-quarters of the adult U.S. population watched or listened to an arts performance or a program about the arts through the media, and about two-thirds participated directly through hands-on experiences—for example, by playing an instrument, painting or sculpting, writing, or taking photographs. These latter activities are comparable in popularity to such non-arts activities as gardening, exercising, and camping.

Although the literature does not specifically address why some forms of participation are more popular than others, it appears that the answer may be related in part to ready availability. Watching television (which consumes about three hours of every American's day, according to Robinson and Godbey, 1997) and listening to the radio or a CD are ideally suited to filling small bits of time, can be done simultaneously with other activities, and are possible at almost any time for most people. Thus, participation through the media is flexible in that it can be fit into most people's schedules more or less by choice. Hands-on activities are also flexible, but attending live performances, which are usually scheduled for specific times and places, is much less so.

Rates of participation vary not only with the form of participation but also with the type of art. Whether participation is through attendance, the media, or hands-on engagement, rates of participation are lowest for opera and ballet, intermediate for classical music and jazz, and highest for theater and musicals. Very little is known about why arts participants choose one type of art over another. The literature on individual motivations indicates that interest in the programmed material is a relatively important factor in the decision to attend a specific performance (Ford Foundation, 1974), but this fact does not explain why an individual chooses one type of art rather than another. How relevant the programmed material is to the individual is also likely to play a role, but this connection has not been researched. And as discussed above, an individual's ability to tailor participation to his or her own schedule and tastes—i.e., the flexibility of form of participation—may also play a role.⁴

In comparing participation levels, the issue of crossover effects also arises. Crossover effects in arts participation could come about in one of two ways: (1) a person who takes part in the arts through one form of participation may be

⁴It is interesting to note that art museums, which have higher attendance rates than do any of the performing arts, have greater flexibility in terms of the hours they are open and the material they offer.

more inclined to take part through another form—e.g., if he participates through the media (say, watches arts programs on television), he may be more apt to attend live arts performances; and (2) a person who participates in a particular type of art may be more inclined to participate in another—e.g., if she attends live symphony performances, she may be more likely to attend musicals. Love, in a major study of crossover effects in the arts (Love, 1995), suggests that crossover effects are more the exception than the rule. He found that with a few notable exceptions—e.g., jazz lovers are very likely to attend performances, listen to recordings, and watch programs about jazz, and people who watch television programs about one type of art are very likely to watch programs about other types—crossover effects are not typical of arts participation.⁵

In attempting to compare participation rates over time, we encountered complications due to changes in survey procedures and much higher refusal rates in the most recent (1997) SPPA data. The data available indicate that total attendance at live performances increased between 4 and 16 percent from 1982 to 1997. Most of this increase, however, appears to be a product of population growth and increasing educational levels within the population. In contrast, the rates of participation through the media and through hands-on engagement appear to have increased.

Who Participates

Virtually all studies of arts participation include some analysis of the individual characteristics associated with being a participant. Of these, education is by far the most closely correlated with all three forms of participation in the arts (National Endowment for the Arts, 1998; Robinson, 1993; Schuster, 1991).⁶ Individuals with higher levels of education—particularly those with college and graduate degrees—have much higher participation rates than individuals with less education. However, this connection appears to be stronger for those who participate through attendance rather than through the media and is least pronounced for hands-on participants (National Endowment for the Arts, 1998).

What drives this education effect is not altogether clear. More highly educated individuals are more likely to have been exposed to the arts during the course of

⁵It should be noted that these comparisons were made using the population in general. It is quite possible that a comparison's structure may well affect its results. Thus, for instance, the degree of crossover found may well depend on whether one uses as the standard the percentage of participants in the less frequent activity (e.g., hands-on participation) who also attend live performances or the percentage of participants in the more frequent activity (e.g., participation through the media) who also attend live performances or participate through hands-on engagement. Unfortunately, there is no empirical evidence on such differences.

⁶The effects of education are also observed across disciplines. See, for example, National Endowment for the Arts, 1998; Deveaux, 1994; Holak et al., 1986; Keagen, 1987; Lemmons, 1966.

their education—and familiarity with and knowledge of the arts are directly related to arts participation, as is the case for most types of leisure activities, i.e., the more familiarity and knowledge, the more participation (Kelley and Freisinger, 2000). Education also helps individuals develop skill in dealing with the abstract—a skill useful for appreciating the arts (Toffler, 1964). The fact (noted above) that the effects of education appear to be most pronounced in comparisons of attendance, which is the most social form of participation, suggests that social factors—e.g., prestige, the influence of friends and relatives, and what those friends and relatives view as preferred forms of entertainment—are also important.

The findings for other socio-demographic factors are more ambiguous. While gender and age matter, they are less important than education. Age appears to have a more pronounced effect on hands-on participation rates than on the other participation rates (Peters and Cherbo, 1996), and rates of attendance and through-the-media participation do not vary significantly with age (after controlling for other factors) except after age 65. Such other factors as marital status, political ideology, income, and race all appear to be associated with differences in participation rates at first glance, but their effects tend to disappear once education is controlled for.

Along with these variables, the literature also examines the relationship between participation and background factors such as arts education and contact with the arts as a child (Bergonzi and Smith, 1996; Orend and Keegan, 1996). Both of these factors have been shown to be strongly associated with increased participation. Moreover, these effects appear to hold even after education levels are controlled for. Orend and Keegan (1996) suggest that the effects of arts socialization (in the form of arts education classes and more contacts with the arts) are particularly important for explaining differences in participation rates among the less-well-educated.

Finally, studies of the frequency with which the population participates in the arts indicate that the distribution of participation is highly skewed: a relatively small percentage of the population accounts for the vast majority of total arts participation.⁷ People can generally be sorted into three categories based on their arts participation: those who rarely (if ever) participate, those who participate infrequently, and those who participate frequently.

⁷The most comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon is one done by Schuster (1991) for art museum attendance. However, it has also been noted by Robinson et al. (1985) and Robinson (1993) for the performing arts.

Motivations for Participation

To understand individuals' motivations for participation, three questions must be addressed: Why do people participate in the arts rather than in other leisure activities? Why do they participate in different ways—through attendance, through the media, and through hands-on engagement? And why do they choose specific types of art? Each of these questions addresses a different aspect of participation. The first relates to overall levels of demand; the other two refer to the ways that demand is distributed by form of participation and type of art. The empirical literature addresses the first question but rarely addresses the other two.

By and large, studies of participants' motivations focus on the reasons individuals give for deciding whether to attend or not attend performances (Ford Foundation, 1974; National Endowment for the Arts, 1998; Robinson, 1993). These studies highlight a variety of practical and contextual factors—e.g., costs, availability, information, scheduling—that drive individual decisions. Interestingly, the importance attached to these factors appears to depend on whether the individual is a rare, occasional, or frequent participant in the arts. Those who frequently attend but would like to attend more are most likely to cite practical factors as an important consideration. For those who attend occasionally or rarely, these factors are less important (Schuster, 1991). This finding suggests that the participation behavior of frequent, occasional, and rare participants may be motivated by different factors.

In addition to studies of individual decisions, the empirical literature includes studies seeking to explain shifts that drive demand for the arts at the aggregate level (Urice, 1992; Butsch, 2000). Four sets of factors in particular have been used to explain changes in overall demand: changes in the population's size and composition; changes in people's taste for the arts; changes in practical factors (such as availability, income, prices, and time) that affect individuals' ability to realize their preferences for the arts; and changes in the stock of knowledge about the arts. These factors affect participation in expected ways. For example, arts participation has been shown to increase as the population grows, as education levels increase, as the arts become more available or less expensive relative to other leisure activities, and as more people are exposed to the arts as children or in school. Understanding the dynamic behind changes in tastes is less straightforward because it relates to a question not typically addressed in the empirical literature: What are the underlying determinants of individual tastes?

Indeed, because the empirical work on participation is constrained by the data available and by the limits of those data, comprehensive explanations for

participation behavior are much more likely to be found in the theoretical literature.

THEORETICAL LITERATURE

Compared to the empirical literature on arts participation, the theoretical literature is much less extensive. The social sciences in general have not been particularly successful in constructing theories that systematically explain participation behavior. The most comprehensive work can be found in the economics literature, which approaches participation decisions within the framework of a general model of consumer behavior (Heilbrun and Gray, 1993). Most of the theoretical work within the other social science disciplines can be viewed as complementing the economics approach by focusing on the determinants of individual tastes. The research literature on leisure, while not offering a comprehensive framework for explaining arts behavior, does offer several important insights into that behavior.

Economic Approaches

In the traditional economic approach to participation behavior, individuals are assumed to be rational consumers who seek to maximize satisfaction (utility) by choosing a level of arts participation that satisfies their preferences for the arts, subject to constraints of income and price. An individual's preferences, or tastes, are assumed to be fixed and to depend on a host of individual characteristics (socio-demographic and psychological factors) largely assumed to be "outside" the model.

Income and price play the key roles in this framework. In general, as the price of participation increases, individuals participate less. *Price* here refers to the price of arts participation and related activities (e.g., admission costs, transportation, childcare) and the price of alternative goods or leisure activities that are "substitutes" for arts participation. Thus, the level of arts participation depends on the price of participation relative to the price of substitute leisure activities (Throsby and Winter, 1979; Vogel, 2000; Nardone, 1982).

Conversely, as income rises, participation should rise. However, the direct effects of rising income may be partly offset by the "opportunity costs" of participation—i.e., the earnings forgone by spending one's time participating in the arts rather than working. The tradeoff between the direct (and positive) earnings effect and the indirect (and negative) opportunity-cost effect varies with an individual's preference for the arts relative to other goods and leisure activities and with his or her income level. The greater an individual's taste for the arts, the more likely the income effect will dominate. In addition, the opportunity-

cost effect appears to dominate at lower and moderate income levels, whereas the income effect dominates at higher income levels—a pattern that helps explain higher participation levels among higher-income (and thus among better-educated) individuals (Felton, 1992).

Stigler and Becker (1977) offer a reformulation of the traditional economic model. They suggest that the satisfaction and enjoyment individuals derive from the arts depend not simply on income, price, and tastes but also on such factors as prior artistic experience, knowledge of the arts, education, and family background (which are normally viewed as correlates of taste) because these factors allow individuals to become more effective consumers of the arts. In other words, the more experience and familiarity an individual has with the arts, the more enjoyment he or she is able to derive from a particular level of consumption.

The economics literature offers two important insights into the arts participation decision. First, it highlights the role that practical factors such as price, income, information, and leisure alternatives play in individuals' participation decisions. For example, as the price of arts participation increases (either directly, in the form of higher admissions and related costs, or indirectly, in the form of its relationship to the price of other leisure activities), participation will decline. Also, as consumers gain more information on the availability and prices of arts activities relative to those of other leisure activities, participation rates will change, the direction of the change depending on the outcome of the comparison. And as the range of substitute leisure activities expands, arts participation will be affected by the individual's having more alternatives to choose from.

The second insight from the economics literature is the idea that the more knowledgeable people are about the arts, the more likely they are to participate, because they gain more satisfaction and enjoyment from a given level of consumption than do people who are less knowledgeable. This effect provides a potential explanation for why participation levels vary as sharply as they do among rare, occasional, and frequent arts consumers. It also helps to explain why some people use the term *addiction* for the love that art aficionados (those who are enthusiastic fans of the arts) have for the arts.

Other Conceptual Approaches

As indicated above, noneconomic studies of arts participation are apt to pursue a descriptive rather than a conceptual approach. However, these studies can be viewed as complementing the economic approach by focusing on the empirical correlates of participation as proxies for individual tastes. Thus, the work of

sociologists who focus on such socio-demographic correlates of participation as education, family background, gender, and ethnicity can be viewed as identifying the background characteristics that determine individuals' tastes. Similarly, psychologists, who focus on personality and related individual characteristics, can be viewed as elucidating the psychological factors that may predispose individuals to participate in the arts.⁸

Perhaps the most useful body of conceptual literature on participation is the interdisciplinary work on leisure activity (Kelley, 1987). Although this literature does not offer a fully integrated theory of participation, it provides several important concepts for understanding individuals' arts participation decisions. These concepts are particularly useful for addressing those motivational issues that, as we noted above, have not been adequately dealt with in the empirical literature: relative preferences for the arts versus other leisure activities, for particular types of art, and for particular forms of participation.

For example, the leisure literature identifies the amount and nature of the leisure time available to an individual as being central to his or her leisure choices. Underlying this point is the recognition that an individual's time can be used in one of three ways (Robinson and Godbey, 1997): for work and work-related activities (e.g., commuting), for the basic necessities of life (e.g., sleeping, eating, dressing), and for discretionary, or leisure, activities. Since the amount of time in a day is fixed, more time spent in any one of these ways means less available time for the other two. Moreover, because the amount of time an individual spends tending to life's basic necessities is relatively fixed, the major tradeoff tends to be between work and leisure.

How an individual chooses to spend his or her leisure time will be directly influenced by the amount of that time and how it is structured. As the amount of leisure time decreases, the opportunity costs of that time will increase and the individual will thus become more selective. As an individual's leisure time becomes increasingly fragmented—whether due to irregular work schedules, family responsibilities, or something else—he or she is likely to become increasingly selective about how to use any “free” time. Leisure activities that do not fit into the busy schedule will lose out, while those that are most adaptable to it will become more popular. Robinson and Godbey (1997) refer to this phenomenon as “leisure by appointment” and suggest that it has become increasingly common.

⁸A particularly interesting example of this approach is the work of Zaltman (1998), who has identified a basic set of constructs, metaphors, and themes that individuals use to describe their experiences with the arts. As Zaltman suggests, these themes provide considerable insight into the way the arts resonate with people on a deep psychological level.

A major reason for this pattern may well be the changing availability and increasing fragmentation of leisure time in U.S. society. Although the growth in leisure time enjoyed in the United States for much of the 20th century has reversed for some segments of the population, it is unclear whether it has for Americans in general. Robinson and Godbey (1997) argue that with a few notable exceptions, Americans now have as much available leisure time as they did in the past. Schor (1991) argues the reverse. Most observers do agree, however, that the structure of leisure time has become more fragmented as a result of increasingly irregular work schedules in the United States (Vogel, 2000), and that this phenomenon is especially true for the more highly educated, who are the heaviest consumers of the arts.

According to Putnam (2000), the perception of reduced leisure time and a growing focus on home-centered leisure activities have increased the competition that the arts, especially the live performing arts, face from other leisure activities. Although the emphasis in the leisure literature is on how leisure time constraints affect the choice between participating in the arts versus other leisure activities, these constraints also affect choices among types of art. As we suggested earlier, a reason for the observed differences in attendance rates may be the flexibility offered by specific activities. An individual visiting an art museum can choose when to visit, how much time to spend, and what to view and not to view. An individual does not have this same flexibility when attending a live event, which usually takes place at a specific time, lasts for a specific duration, and presents a set program.

A second contribution of the leisure literature is the insight it offers into the motivations of arts aficionados—those people who are devoted followers of the arts. Unlike the economics literature, which explains the arts aficionado phenomenon in terms of the increasing satisfaction that familiarity with the arts brings, the leisure literature tends to view it more in psychological terms: a small fraction of the participants in leisure activities become serious “amateurs” for whom the activity becomes an end in itself (Stebbins, 1992). As Kelley and Freisinger (2000) point out, this phenomenon is common to a wide range of leisure activities in which there is a progression in commitment to the activity. As their commitment grows, the individuals come to define themselves in terms of the activity, or in their words, “It becomes central to who one is” (pp. 82–83). Indeed, the individual sometimes becomes part of a community of individuals and almost all of his or her friends share this same activity. This type of community of interest has also been identified by Putnam (2000) as a major need in current U.S. society.

A final important insight that the leisure literature offers concerns the factors that influence an individual’s decision about how to participate—i.e., through attendance, the media, or hands-on engagement. In this case, one suggestion

from the literature is that a useful framework for analyzing this decision is to consider two different dimensions of a person's choices: Is this person primarily seeking entertainment or fulfillment? Does he or she prefer to participate alone or with others? (Kelley and Freisinger, 2000; Kelley, 1987). The first of these dimensions distinguishes between activities primarily undertaken as a form of entertainment, such as watching television (Robinson and Godbey, 1997), and those undertaken for enrichment or self-fulfillment, or what has been referred to as "serious leisure" (Stebbins, 1992). The second dimension pertains to the social context: Is the social experience equally as or more important than the activity itself, or is the individual's main motivation self-focused—i.e., is he or she primarily interested in developing proficiency in the activity?

Combined, these two dimensions provide a framework for distinguishing among different types of arts participants (see Figure 2.1). Within the group of individuals primarily seeking entertainment, those who are self-focused will be more inclined to participate through the media (by, for example, listening to recorded music or watching a play on television), and those seeking a social experience, the "casual attendees," will be more inclined to attend a live performance. Within the group primarily desiring enrichment and self-fulfillment, the self-focused will be inclined to engage in hands-on activities, and those seeking the social experience will be "aficionado attendees."

People falling into a particular cell of this classification scheme are not precluded from participating in other ways. Those who primarily participate in the arts through the media may also attend live performances, as may hands-on participants. Moreover, regardless of their form of participation, individuals will also choose from the various art forms, both the high and the more popular. However, this basic scheme provides a useful device for recognizing that individuals' motivations for participation and the predominant form that participation is likely to take will differ and that these differences are important to bear in mind when developing an outreach strategy.

		What Person Seeks	
		Entertainment	Fulfillment
Participation Preference	Developing proficiency (self-focused)	Participation through media	Hands-on participation
	Social experience	Attendance (casual)	Attendance (aficionado)

Figure 2.1—Framework Explaining Forms of Participation

These differences may be particularly useful for arts institutions seeking to increase attendance at live performances. For example, the scheme suggests that the market for live performing arts consists of two distinct groups: casual attendees and aficionados. Casual attendees differ from aficionados not only in their motivations but also in their numbers, knowledge of the arts, and in all probability their tastes. The aficionados are the frequent attendees discussed above. They are a small and select group of people likely to be knowledgeable about and interested in a diverse array of content. The casual attendees, in contrast, are likely to be far more numerous, less interested in the art form per se, and more likely to be attracted to programming that is more traditional or that relates directly to their daily lives.

These findings suggest several points for arts institutions to consider when developing strategies to increase participation. First, they need to be mindful of how their activities fit into the schedules of their target populations. Second, they need to be aware that potential participants have many leisure activity options (both art and non-art) open to them and thus need to know how what is being offered compares with those other options. Third, given potential participants' limited leisure time and increasing entertainment options, arts institutions must consider the nature of the target groups, their motivations, and how the institution's programming relates to those motivations. The insights suggest that very different engagement strategies may be needed to increase participation among the three groups: those who rarely (if ever) participate in the arts, those who participate occasionally, and those who participate frequently. Finally, arts institutions must realize that the process of converting individuals from rare to occasional to frequent participants is likely to require a significant transformation in those individuals' commitment to the arts and that this process is likely to be long (Morrison and Dalglish, 1987). However, once the transformation occurs, those individuals may well become part of the institution's community and, as such, will be not only habitual attendees but also volunteers, contributors, and board members.

CRITIQUE OF PARTICIPATION LITERATURE

Despite providing a variety of information about participation behavior and its dynamics, the participation literature is unlikely to provide adequate guidance for arts institutions interested in building participation for two reasons. First, it leaves many important questions about participation behavior unanswered; second, and more important, it fails to capture the complexity of the decision-making process. In fact, the complexity of the participation behavior documented in the empirical literature is not even reflected in the conceptual approaches offered in the theoretical literature.

Unanswered Questions

Given limited data and the tendency of that data to focus more on description than on explanation, the literature's having largely ignored several issues about participation is probably not surprising. As noted above, very little is known about why individuals prefer one type of art activity to another or why they choose one form of arts participation over another. Nor does anyone really understand much about the reasons individuals cite for their participation decisions. How does one explain, for example, the diversity of those reasons?

Moreover, it is not known how certain factors that have been demonstrated to be correlated with participation behavior actually operate. For example, education has been found to be strongly associated with arts participation, but why this is so is unclear. We cannot explain, for example, why even though most regular arts participants are highly educated, not all well-educated individuals are arts participants, or why many less-well-educated individuals are regular arts participants. The same general point can be made about any of the factors that are correlated with participation, most notably arts education and exposure to the arts as a child. Although these various socio-demographic factors are assumed to be proxies for differences in taste for the arts, we do not understand the underlying determinants of tastes. Nor do we know what types of programming are likely to be most appealing to different tastes.

Finally, our review of the literature suggests that one key to deepening individuals' level of involvement with the arts is to instill in them a greater commitment to the arts so that the arts become central to who they are. But how to accomplish this remains unclear. Despite the best efforts of scores of institutions and dedicated individuals and the investment of uncounted dollars, participation building remains a very difficult and not very well understood task.

Inadequacy of Conceptual Approaches

Although these knowledge gaps may be frustrating to institutions attempting to design and implement participation-building strategies, they are probably inevitable. Neither policymakers nor practitioners are ever likely to have complete information on which to base their decisions. A more important—and potentially remediable—problem is the apparent failure of most theoretical approaches to capture the complexity of the process people go through in deciding whether to participate in the arts.

The empirical literature points out this complexity in several ways. For example, the very diversity of participation rates both by form of participation and type of art suggests that the factors driving these rates are not straightforward. Simi-

larly, despite the prominence given to socio-demographic factors in most empirical studies of participation patterns, the literature suggests (as discussed earlier) that arts participation can be better explained if participants are sorted into three basic categories: those who participate rarely (if at all), occasionally, and frequently. Moreover, socio-demographic variables do not appear to be closely correlated with differences in frequency of participation once these three behavioral categories are distinguished from each other. In other words, although the more highly educated individuals are more likely than others to attend frequently, education appears to play little role in explaining why some frequent attenders attend so much more than others do (Schuster, 1991). Finally, the very diversity of the reasons individuals give for their decisions to participate suggests that the reasons are complex. Yet this complexity is not generally reflected in the theoretical literature, a fact that limits this literature's utility for practitioners.

Consider, for example, the fact that the theoretical literature implicitly treats the participation decision as dichotomous—i.e., as if one simply decided to participate or not participate. The diversity of responses that individuals give for their participation decisions suggests that this is not so, that people actually go through a series of different considerations when deciding whether to participate. They are likely, for example, to first consider whether the arts have anything to offer them. They then consider what those benefits are and where they are likely to find them. They might then consider different, specific opportunities to participate, such as attending a play or visiting an art museum. Finally, if they do end up participating, they are likely to evaluate their experience and subsequently revise (for better or worse) their initial expectations about the benefits of the arts.

We do not mean to suggest here that all individuals proceed in a linear fashion through all these steps. Much of the explanatory power of the behavioral distinction between rare, occasional, and frequent participants derives from the likelihood that these groups will be at different stages in the decisionmaking process. Frequent participants are already convinced that the arts are important to them and thus will focus on which events to choose. For those who are rare participants, consideration of which event to attend is not really relevant unless they somehow become convinced that the arts have something to offer them. A further complication in this decisionmaking process is introduced for individuals who participate not because of having come to a decision along the usual pathway but because a friend or relative has invited them to do so. Their decision may have less to do with the arts than with their relationship with the individual who invited them. Whether they participate in the future, however, will hinge at least in part on their participation experience.

The central point here is not the exact steps in the decisionmaking process but the fact that more than one decision is involved. Moreover, different factors are likely to determine the outcome of each of these decisions, and the influence of these factors is unlikely to be apparent if the process is not disaggregated. Perhaps the clearest example of why this disaggregation is important is the considerable variation found in the literature on how such economic constraints as ticket prices affect participation behavior. If, as we believe, ticket prices are only relevant for individuals already intending to attend, then estimating how prices will affect participation in the total population (as is implicitly done when a study regards participation as a dichotomous choice) will yield an inaccurate picture of pricing effects.

By oversimplifying the decision process, the theoretical literature fails to provide much guidance to arts institutions trying to decide which strategies to use to increase participation. In this context, the critical issue is determining which tactics are appropriate for which target populations (i.e., for those already participating, inclined to participate but not currently doing so, and not inclined to participate) and when to employ those tactics. For example, adjusting price levels in order to spur participation among individuals not inclined to participate in the first place, as many organizations do, is not likely to be very effective. An effective tactic in this case must deal with showing these people what benefits the arts offer them.

A second problem with the participation literature is its primary focus on objective, socio-demographic factors in explaining participation behavior.⁹ As already noted, these do not explain why some individuals with a given set of background characteristics are frequent participants and others are not. This focus on socio-demographic factors rather than on the factors that motivate participants provides little help to arts institutions, since institutions typically have little or no way to influence background characteristics, including education.

Finally, by stressing socio-demographic factors, the conceptual models give too little attention to behavioral differences in participation, which in many ways seem to be the key to understanding participation decisions. In focusing on background factors, which institutions have little ability to modify, the conceptual models divert attention from contextual factors—e.g. how institutions advertise their message, the types of programming they offer, and the tactics they employ to increase participation—which institutions can modify.

⁹In our survey of arts organizations, most of them indicated that they identified target populations and designed strategies for those populations in terms of demographic characteristics alone.

The next chapter introduces a behavioral model of the decisionmaking process that we believe provides considerable insight into how and why individuals choose to participate and, as such, can help arts institutions attempting to design and implement effective participation-building strategies.