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Constant, serial and trigger volunteers: volunteering across the lifecourse and into older age

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Abstract

In recent years there has been an increased recognition that philanthropic engagement needs to be understood longitudinally, rather than as a snapshot in time. Much of this work is quantitative, utilising panel data to track groups of individuals over a number of years. In contrast, this article takes a qualitative approach to the study of volunteering over the course of individuals' and their families' lives. In doing so, it explores how engagement changes over the lifecourse, and how this impacts volunteer engagement in older age. Understanding this is crucial: volunteering is not an activity that takes place in isolation but rather one that must be situated over time and within a range of other activities. This article uses data from 26 life history interviews conducted in England to develop a heuristic put forward by Davis Smith and Gay (2005), which proposes three categories of older volunteer: constant, serial and trigger volunteers.

Key words volunteering • ageing • lifecourse • longitudinal

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increased recognition that engagement in philanthropic activities – the giving of time and of money to charitable causes – is too dynamic a process to be studied at a fixed moment in time (see Neuberger, 2008; Brodie et al, 2011). Rather, it needs to be understood as occurring as part of a lifelong process of decisions made among changing circumstances, and therefore best understood longitudinally. Much of the work that has attempted to take this approach has utilised quantitative methodologies, drawing on panel survey data to track individuals' philanthropic engagement over a period of time (see Van Willigen, 2000; Oesterle et al, 2004; Tang, 2006; Butrica et al, 2007; Choi and Chou, 2010). Such research provides insight into the broad patterns of volunteer engagement over the lifecourse, but cannot capture the individual, family and wider contexts in which decisions to engage (or disengage) are made. Even where research has sought to take into account contextual factors, this has been centred on one particular element, such as the influence of spouses' volunteering on each other (Rotolo and Wilson, 2006) or the impact of divorce on volunteering (Davidson et al, 2003; Hank and Erlinghagen, 2006; Butrica et al, 2007; Nesbit, 2010).

This article expands on this research by taking a qualitative lifecourse approach, using data from 26 life history interviews to critically explore and develop three patterns of volunteer engagement across the lifecourse and into older age. The model developed in this article was first proposed by Davis Smith and Gay (2005) and categorises volunteers as follows:

- *constant volunteers* are those who have volunteered for most or all of their adult life, either with one or multiple organisations;
- *serial volunteers* are those who have volunteered intermittently and for different organisations over their adult life;
- *trigger volunteers* are those who only begin volunteering in older age.

This categorisation, however, only shows the nature of each individual's formal volunteering across the lifecourse. It fails to capture that, over time, individuals and households are constantly (re)negotiating their paid work and other commitments and having to make decisions as to when and how to volunteer. These decisions will be facilitated or constrained by their changing individual and household patterns. As such, it is necessary to explore the different work roles that individuals have had to balance at different points across the lifecourse. This article does so. In considering work roles, it expands on the traditionally limited focus to look at a range of further activities:

- paid work (and whether it is full time or part time);
- household structure (demonstrated by marriage/cohabitation and by having

- dependent children);
- engagement in formal volunteering.

While there is no universally agreed definition of volunteering, it is defined in this article, consistent with a body of previous work, as any act that involves giving time and effort, for no financial payment, of free will, to provide for those beyond one's own close family (Davis Smith and Gay, 2005; Hardill and Baines, 2009; Rochester et al, 2011). Older age is a similarly contested term. Research on older volunteers in England (see Davis Smith and Gay, 2005; Hardill and Baines, 2009) has used 50 as the age at which individuals enter older age, while recognising that fixed chronological ages at which an individual becomes 'older' are only useful in so far as they offer parameters within which provision for older people or the study of older age can be undertaken. By looking at volunteering over the lifecourse and into older age, this article does not seek to define older age as a fixed concept, but rather as a period in life when individuals may transition out of paid work and from roles as parents of young children.

This article now goes on to outline the theoretical framework for this study, using a lifecourse approach to understand engagement across the lifecourse. A lifecourse approach is used alongside a Total Social Organisation of Labour (TSOL) framework (Glucksmann, 2000; Taylor, 2004) to explore how volunteer engagement is facilitated and constrained by other work roles. Then, it outlines the qualitative methodology for the narrative interviews. This is followed by an exploration of the lifecourse patterns and events that typify each of the three categories of older volunteer proposed by Davis Smith and Gay (2005), using three case studies to draw out key themes. The article concludes by discussing the implications of these categories for the understanding of volunteering patterns into older age, how this approach furthers our understanding of volunteering and how this can aid in the recruitment and retention of older volunteers.

Why take a lifecourse approach?

How old an individual is does not define the roles they hold or the activities they undertake, nor are there clear relations between chronological age and significant life events such as marriage, childbearing or retirement (Katz and Monk, 1993). Volunteering, or indeed any activity, undertaken in older age implicitly or explicitly reflects previous events and activities undertaken across the lifecourse (Hareven, 1995). The term 'lifecourse' refers to the study of individual and collective experiences from a longitudinal perspective (see Hareven and Adams, 1982; Katz and Monk, 1993). Scholars of the lifecourse reject the previously common term 'lifecycle', which is criticised for tending to assume a relatively rigid set of age categorisations, often related to social norms, which suggest a presumed fixed or inevitable series of events occurring at certain chronological ages (Rossi, 1980; Hareven and Adams, 1982; Allatt et al, 1987; Katz and Monk, 1993; Hunt, 2005). Hockey and James (1993) suggest that this change in terminology from lifecycle to lifecourse was made necessary due to changes to the way of life in most Western societies. Current understandings of the lifecourse are based on the recognition that individuals' lives are increasingly heterogeneous, with huge variation between different individuals' rich social experiences (Hunt, 2005). While a small number of events in each individual's life are inevitable – everyone will age, everyone will die – the nature and timing of even these events are neither linear nor predictable (Hunt, 2005).

Understanding the significance of the lifecourse to an individual can only be achieved by drawing on their own perceptions of their life to date; thus, the lifecourse is a 'self-referential process' (Mayer, 2004: 166). Individuals act in the context of past experiences, and each individual's understanding of their past therefore serves to inform their future (Mayer, 2004; Hunt, 2005). The study of the lifecourse is in effect, then, the study of the cumulative impact of a lifetime's sequence of events, some major and some comparatively minor (Elder, 1985; Bailey, 2009). It is concerned with how individuals experience the range of events, states and stages that occur from birth onwards (Mayer, 2004). By constructing lifecourse biographies, it is possible to relate different elements of life together (Dykstra and van Wissen, 1999; Bailey, 2009). Recognising the fluidity of lifecourse transitions, when individuals turn 50 it is proposed that they enter the 'retirement zone' (Vickerstaff, 2006: 455).

From this point on, some individuals are able to retire if they wish, while others may choose or be forced to carry on working for economic or other reasons.

Participation rates in voluntary activities change across the lifecourse, waxing and waning as other commitments and priorities come and go. By taking a qualitative lifecourse approach, this article explores the reasons behind these trends, and how engagement in older age is embedded within previous engagement in volunteering along with paid work and familial responsibilities.

A small number of qualitative studies on volunteering have argued for a lifecourse approach (see Hardill et al, 2007; Baines and Hardill, 2008; Neuberger, 2008; Brodie et al, 2011; Woolvin, 2011). Decisions to volunteer, these writers argue, occur across the lifecourse, and any decisions made in older age need to be understood in the context of decisions, experiences and events that have occurred previously. As Neuberger (2008: 16) argues: 'People may dip in and out of volunteering, doing more, less or nothing at all as volunteers at different stages of their lives, as a matter of choice or through circumstances.' Hardill et al (2007: 400) state that the use of a lifecourse approach in volunteering research allows the researcher to 'understand the qualitative experience of volunteering, specifically why people create (emotional, temporal and physical) space for voluntary work, and how they juggle unpaid voluntary work with other "work" (paid and unpaid) they undertake'. This article develops this by considering the wider social context in which decisions to volunteer are made, applying a lifecourse approach not just to the study of volunteering but also to the context that facilitates or constrains it.

Balancing volunteering with other roles

It is not just the longitudinal context of volunteering that needs to be understood if we are to fully understand volunteering in older age, but also the wider context of work relations, paid and unpaid. To do so, this research is grounded in the Total Social Organisation of Labour (TSOL) framework, a theoretical approach that highlights the interconnected nature of all different types of productive activity. TSOL rejects any hierarchy of work tasks, arguing that all are interdependent on one another and that to isolate any from the context in which they exist would be a failure to appreciate these interrelationships (Glucksmann, 1995, 2000, 2005). Glucksmann (2005: 28) argues that it:

"is vital to adopt an inclusive approach to work as comprising all labour activities since it is undertaken within a wide variety of socio-economic relations. While paid employment is the dominant mode in modern industrial societies, work is also conducted in a multiplicity of ways, many of which are on an unpaid basis in the household, community and public formal sphere."

TSOL seeks to explore the ways in which different forms of work activities are allocated to individuals, within families, organisations and communities (Glucksmann, 2000; Taylor, 2004). This widening of the conceptual boundaries of what constitutes work is necessary if we are to understand the complexity of individuals' lives, and of the relationships between volunteering and the different forms of work they do (Taylor, 2004; Parry et al, 2005).

The redrawing of the conceptual boundaries of what is considered 'work' to include volunteering arose from a recognition that traditional labour theory – as conceptualised by Glucksmann (1995, 2000, 2005) – overlooked those forms of work beyond paid employment. Volunteering, Taylor (2004) attests, challenges such dichotomies, in that it is taking place in the public sphere, often alongside paid workers, yet is unpaid. The reconceptualisation of volunteering that Taylor (2004: 31) proposes asserts that there is not a straightforward correspondence between pay and work and, rather, that work is 'embedded in and defined by the social relations within which it is located'.

Following this reasoning, this article takes a more holistic approach and explores not just the volunteering that individuals participate in across the lifecourse, but also the paid work they undertake and other work activities that they are involved in. The processes by which individuals find the space in their lives to volunteer are therefore part of a complex interplay of circumstances, including their position within households and communities and the extent to which the social organisation of labour in individuals' lives makes volunteering possible (Taylor, 2005).

Some previous pieces of research have sought to combine a TSOL approach with a lifecourse perspective, with Parry et al (2005: 4) stating that it offers ‘a more accurate depiction of the complex, messy, dynamic trajectories that encapsulate people’s working lives. From this perspective for example, life-stages not normally associated with work, such as time spent in education, retirement or unemployment, take on new interest for the sociologist of work’.

By taking a lifecourse approach to understanding the wide range of overlapping work activities available, research can gain ‘a holistic perspective on a person’s working life rather than simply focussing on their employment or their domestic labour’ (Taylor, 2005: 135). This approach is fundamental to the analysis that this article presents. It builds on Davis Smith and Gay’s (2005) typology of older volunteers, alluded to in the Introduction, which seeks to explore different lifecourse experiences and volunteering patterns:

- *constant volunteers* are those individuals who have given continuous – often lifelong – service to an organisation or a range of organisations, and the volunteering that they do in older age is a continuation of this;
- *serial volunteers* are those individuals who have volunteered while in younger and older age, with the extent and nature of their volunteering changing at different stages of life, including periods where they do not volunteer at all;
- *trigger volunteers* are those individuals whose first experience of volunteering comes in older age, post-50, and who therefore have not previously undertaken formal voluntary and community activities.

Methodology and data analysis

The research on which this article is based was conducted in collaboration with Age UK, in the form of an Economic and Social Research Council and Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (ESRC–CASE) collaborative studentship between 2008 and 2012. Twenty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteers aged from their mid-fifties to late-seventies. The volunteers were recruited in consultation with volunteer managers at the organisations with which they volunteer, who in turn had been contacted through voluntary sector infrastructure groups. The volunteer managers were asked to be gatekeepers and provided a sample of volunteers who reflected the age (post-50), gender and social class of the volunteers at their organisation. Each interview lasted around an hour, and consisted of semi-structured dialogue between the author and individual volunteers. Over half (62%) of interviewees were female, consistent with the trend in the United Kingdom (UK) of women being more likely to volunteer than men (Low et al, 2007). Respondents came from a range of social backgrounds, although there was a clear over-representation of those from middleclass backgrounds. Previous work on volunteering has highlighted that individuals of a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be engaged in formal volunteering through an organisation than those of lower status (Rochester et al, 2011). By using volunteer managers as gatekeepers, this research captured only those engaged in formal volunteering, with a likely skew towards more middle-class participants. Even if the recruitment had enabled a larger sample of lower socioeconomic-status individuals to be interviewed, Hunt (2005) remains sceptical that life history interviews can accurately reflect contextual variables such as class, given the fluidity of both the perceptions and reality of social class.

In line with the TSOL theoretical framework presented here, the interviews took a life history approach, with the main section of the interview consisting of the interviewee being invited to share their experiences of volunteering from the first time they volunteered through to the present day. This was contextualised as the interviewee worked through their volunteering journey with details of paid work and of family commitments.

Interviews were prepared for analysis using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo, with each of the 26 older volunteers’ interviews being coded using a range of themes and categories created as the analysis went on, to allow the research findings to lead the analysis. Each of the volunteers interviewed had different experiences of volunteering and different lifecourse journeys that

had brought them to their present-day volunteer roles. Despite these differences, patterns emerge from the different types of engagement history, which give us a clear indication of how people volunteer, and how this is facilitated and constrained by other roles to which an individual has obligations. Taking the categories proposed by Davis Smith and Gay (2005) of constant, serial and trigger volunteers, this analysis extends this by contextualising volunteering alongside family commitments and paid employment, to present an understanding of where volunteering fits over the lifecourse.

To allow for this development of the understanding of how individuals engage in volunteering over the lifecourse and the contexts in which this engagement occurs, a method was developed that mapped out the paid work (be it part or full time), household structure (the presence/absence of a cohabiting spouse and of dependent children) and engagement in volunteering of each individual. These 'lifecourse maps' (Worth, 2011) contextualised engagement in volunteering from age 30 into and during older age. Age 30 was chosen as the starting point as nearly all respondents could remember clearly what they had been doing at age 30. While a model that tracks engagement back to childhood would have been preferable, the limitations of a single life history interview recollecting many decades past meant that 30, while not perfect, was the best pragmatic option.

From these lifecourse maps, the nature of each individual's volunteering was explored and the participants were sorted into the constant, serial and trigger groups identified by Davis Smith and Gay (2005). Constant and serial volunteers' were as described by Davis Smith and Gay (2005), with those who had volunteered all their lives categorised as constant and those who had volunteered off and on categorised as serial. While Davis Smith and Gay (2005) state that trigger volunteers have never previously volunteered, interviewees whose previous experience of volunteering had been short and many years prior were included in this group. The number of volunteers allocated to each category was relatively even – eight constant, eight serial and ten trigger volunteers.

Lifecourse maps, Worth (2011) argues, are a valuable methodological approach because they allow temporality to be explored graphically, enabling changes and consistencies over time to be more easily observed and explored. For the present study, they show how the allocation of work roles conceptualised by the TSOL approach can be mapped over an individual's lifecourse and how from this we can see how the balance between different roles has changed over time. This is represented visually by columns in the diagrams that follow, the length of which are determined by the number of years in paid employment and the presence of a cohabiting spouse, dependent children and formal voluntary and community activity. A key for how these four factors are shaded in the diagrams is given in Figure 1. Spaces where columns are not shaded represent stages of life when the individual presented was not engaged in those activities, while the black areas at the end of each map show that respondents have not yet reached that age. The diagrams are necessarily simplistic to allow for complex relationships between different types of work to be observed and understood.

The nuance that the diagrams cannot capture is how these factors influence volunteering – this richness is explored in the accompanying text. For example, 'paid employment' is a very broad term and can cover hugely different types of work, which may facilitate or constrain volunteering. However, the broad picture given by the maps allows for temporal patterns of different forms of work to be examined, to see if individuals who have similar patterns of volunteering also have similar patterns in other work roles (Worth, 2011).

Two maps are presented for each of the three categories of volunteer. The first is a combined map of the interviewees in the category, where individuals can be compared side by side to explore trends in their other commitments. The second is a single individual's map, chosen as a case study to explore the nuance of the category in more detail.

Lifecourse map key	
Paid work	
Spouse	
Children at home	
Volunteering	
Age not yet reached	

Figure 1: Lifecourse map key

The lifecourse maps are not sensitive to the different types of volunteering that people have undertaken over the course of their lives. Rochester et al (2011) identify three broad frameworks of volunteering: unpaid work or service, activism and serious leisure. While the first of these is most common in the British context, Stebbins (1992) has developed the concept of ‘serious leisure’ and identified that this may be particularly relevant for older volunteers. For each of the three categories of volunteer, serious leisure motivations to volunteer may be relevant in different ways, but as this article deals with contextual explanations for volunteering rather than with motivations per se, this is not explored here.

In the subsections that follow, the article presents diagrams for each of the three categories and examines the key differences between them. In order to explore in detail the relations between different forms of responsibilities, short case studies of three older volunteers are described:

- Eric is in his mid-sixties and is a constant volunteer.
- Grace is in her early sixties and is a serial volunteer.
- Jack is in his mid-seventies and is a trigger volunteer.

These three case studies were selected because they are the most comprehensive exemplars of the patterns of engagement and other commitments within their respective grouping.

Constant volunteers

Constant volunteers are individuals who have volunteered from young adulthood, or before, and who have continued to do so without interruption into older age. Some constant volunteers had engaged with voluntary activity before they were married, others’ engagement began after marriage, but all were engaged in formal volunteering prior to turning 40 and all have remained volunteers ever since. Most of the eight constant volunteers who took part in this research had volunteered with the same organisation throughout their adult lives, although that was not the case for all, some having moved between organisations. Further, some of those who had maintained a commitment to one organisation throughout their adult lives had also volunteered for other organisations at different times. Of the eight constant volunteers, four were men and four were women.

Key for the group of constant volunteers, shown in Figure 2, is that stability of volunteer engagement is supported by stability in other areas of life, in terms of both domestic circumstances and paid employment. None of the constant volunteers in this research had experienced divorce, a significant finding given work by Davidson et al (2003), Hank and Erlinghagen (2006), Butrica et al (2007) and Nesbit (2010), which found that divorce impacts negatively on volunteering participation for both men and women. Stability of paid employment is also significant – we know from UK data that those

in employment are more likely to volunteer than those who are unemployed (ONS, 2013). The constant volunteers in this study had been able to maintain their constant commitment because of the stability of other areas of their life, benefiting from a range of factors identified in the literature as facilitating volunteer involvement. A common route into volunteering for the constant volunteers was engaging with organisations in childhood and transitioning to being a volunteer in their late teens. Eric’s example highlights this and how stability can support lifelong engagement.

Eric and his wife’s long marriage is represented in Figure 3 by the column labelled ‘Spouse’. Together they have three children; the first two were born while Eric was in his late twenties and the third was born while he was in his early forties. Eric has therefore had dependent children for a long period of his adult life, with his youngest child leaving home around three years ago, as shown in Figure 3 by the column labelled ‘Children’. Throughout his working life, Eric held a series of white-collar professional jobs and was in full-time employment throughout this period. He retired from full time work around three years ago, and has since then done some part-time paid work as a business advisor and mentor. The period Eric spent working full time is shown by the full-width column under ‘Paid employment’, while the last three years when he has worked part time are shown by a half-width column.

Eric currently commits more than three days a week to formal volunteering, with five different organisations:

- Youth Association – for around 50 years and ongoing;
- Village Hall Committee – for around five years and ongoing;
- Business Mentoring – for around three years and ongoing;
- Youth Business Mentoring – for around three years and ongoing;
- Village Appraisal Group – for around two years and ongoing.

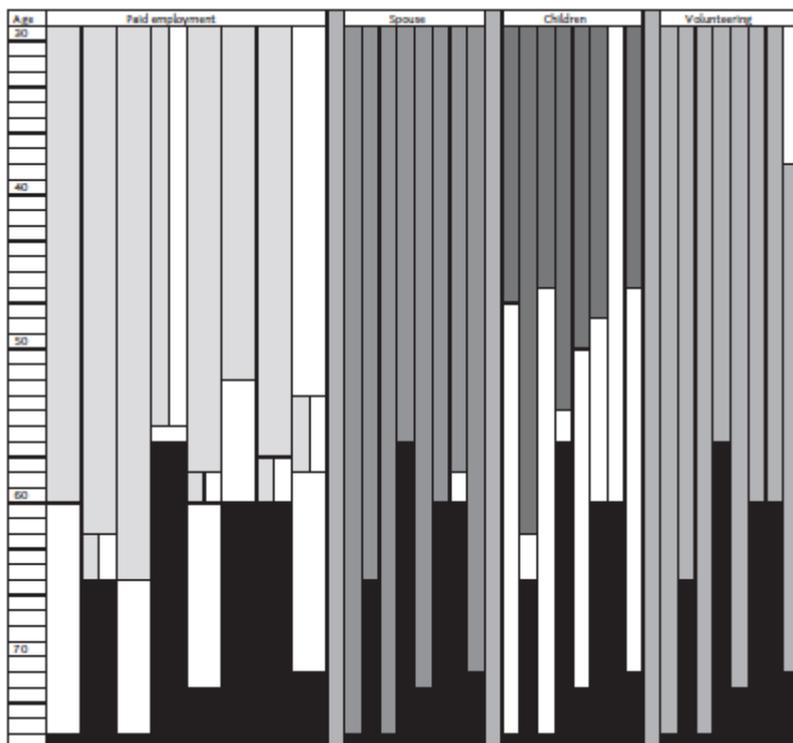


Figure 2: Lifecourse maps of the constant volunteers

The final column (‘Volunteering’) reflects that Eric, as a constant volunteer, has had a lifetime association with the Youth Association. His volunteering with the organisation began in his late teens, his having been a youth member of the organisation prior to this. Eric’s children have all been youth

members of the Youth Association and while his wife has not been involved in it, he commented that throughout her adult life she has been a volunteer with a similar, but female-focused organisation. Eric's marital stability has facilitated his being able to make a lifelong commitment to the Youth Association, with no disruption and within a household where both partners are keen to make time for volunteering:

“Maybe it's the way one is, but my wife is also a doer of things and as well as being a supply teacher on occasion, she's the president of the local [women's organisation], she's secretary of [a female youth organisation], this, that and the other. And so I suppose we both get our interests and enjoyment by being able to communicate about different things that are going on between us.”

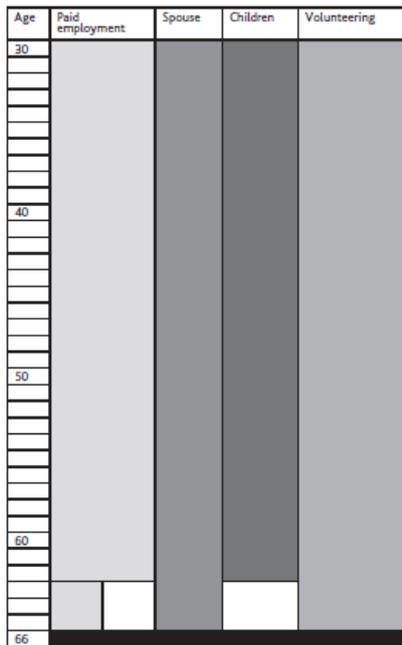


Figure 3: Eric's lifecourse map

This echoes the findings of Rotolo and Wilson (2006) and Hank and Erlinghagen (2009), who find that the volunteer engagement of spouses is closely related, with engagement most likely to occur if both spouses are engaged in volunteering. While Eric and his wife have a relationship where both are free to volunteer and they derive enjoyment from sharing their experiences, that is not to say that he does not seek to manage his volunteering so as to make room to spend time with her.

While Eric's engagement with the Youth Association has remained for around 50 years, the amount and nature of the time Eric has been able to give to the organisation has been constrained by his paid employment, as he outlines: "During my working life I have worked pretty long hours, and over the years my base of operations has been different, so I haven't had the capacity to always get back for six o'clock on a Tuesday night." While volunteering for the Youth Association has been a constant feature of his adult life, the impact of these other roles has been that the nature of his volunteering has changed over the course of his life, with Eric increasingly less directly involved with the young people and now more involved in planning and management for the organisation.

Since his youngest child left home and coupled with reduced time commitments in paid employment since going part time, Eric has been able to take on more roles and has begun new volunteering roles with other organisations, a feature of which is their relation to his previous paid employment as a business innovation manager. This link between volunteering and paid work was echoed by other constant volunteers and is supported by research by Aldikacti Marshall and Taniguchi (2012), which found clear overlaps between the skills and experience that people develop in paid employment and those they use in their voluntary activities.

Serial volunteers

Serial volunteers are older adults who are currently engaged in formal volunteering and who have undertaken formal volunteering on and off over their lives and into older age. The serial volunteers in this study were disproportionately female; of the eight identified, all but one were female. This bias towards females reflects the findings of Baines et al (2006), who note that family transitions such as marriage, children being born, children beginning school and children leaving home are more likely to affect women's participation in volunteering than men's. Common for serial volunteers is a first engagement in volunteering when their children were young, with Choi and Chou (2010) and Wilson (2000) finding that parents of school-age children are more likely to be asked to volunteer and as a consequence more likely to volunteer than other adults.

A particularly striking theme among the serial volunteers in the present research was the significant number of divorcees. This can be seen in Figure 4, which charts the instability of domestic situations alongside the instability of volunteering. When divorce occurs, it impacts on paid employment and volunteering – divorce interrupts and changes family routines, which could lead to individuals having to move home, move jobs, change their caring responsibilities and change their social life (Nesbit, 2010). Further, in light of Baines et al's (2006) findings, the impact of divorce on volunteering is likely to be more significant on women than men – of the five serial volunteers who had experienced divorce, only one was male. This was the case for Grace, whose example shows how instability of domestic and professional life can impact on volunteering engagement.

Over her lifecourse, Grace has been involved with a number of voluntary organisations:

- a playgroup – for around four years from her late twenties;
- a mobile library – for around five years from her late twenties;
- a swimming club – for around eight years from her early thirties;
- meals on wheels – for around five years in her mid-thirties;
- local health committees – for around eight years in her fifties;
- a support organisation for older people – a year and ongoing.

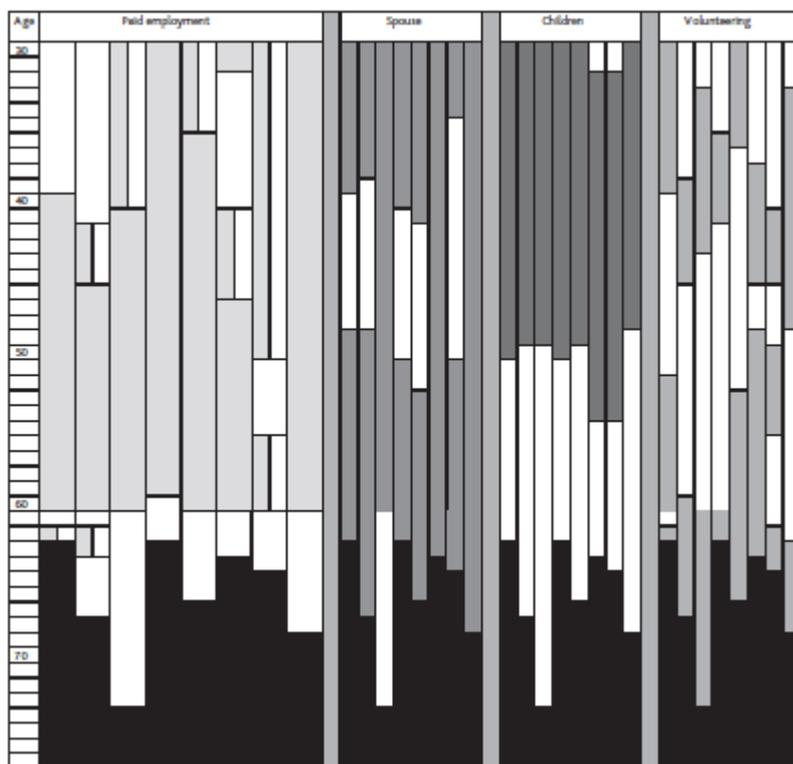


Figure 4: Lifecourse maps of the serial volunteers

She married in her mid-twenties and had two children shortly after (as shown in Figure 5), at which time she did not engage in paid work. Grace’s first experience of volunteering came when her children were young, when she and two friends in her local community set up a playgroup, consistent with Wilson’s (2000) analysis of parental volunteering. As Grace explained: “When it came about there were three of us, we used to stand talking, there’d be a lot of little topics around and the three of us suddenly kind of thought what we need is a playgroup. And it just kind of rolled on from that.” Once Grace’s children had stopped going to the playgroup, she too stopped volunteering there. At this point, she became involved in volunteering to help establish and run a swimming club in her local community. She explained: “Swimming was always my passion.” At the same time as she was volunteering with the swimming club, in the free time she was afforded by her daughters starting primary school, Grace began doing other voluntary work, first driving a mobile library and then delivering meals on wheels. While her children were young, then, and while married to her first husband and not in paid employment, Grace participated in a number of different formal voluntary roles, both with organisations that her children attended and in organisations wholly separate from her daughters.

However, Grace’s volunteering came to an abrupt stop following her divorce at age 40, as can be seen in Figure 5. The framework of Grace’s life had to change completely, as she “had to deal with my children and the fallout from everything”. On finding her feet again, volunteering was not a priority for Grace: “I stopped my volunteer work, my marriage broke up and lots of personal things, so I stopped volunteer work, that had all finished and I started to get back on my feet again, I started to go back to work properly and things.” She started full-time paid employment following her divorce, as shown in Figure 5, in order to support her daughters. Having worked in a range of jobs, Grace came to be working with a local care-in-the-community business, which she later took over and ran until her retirement two years prior to this research.

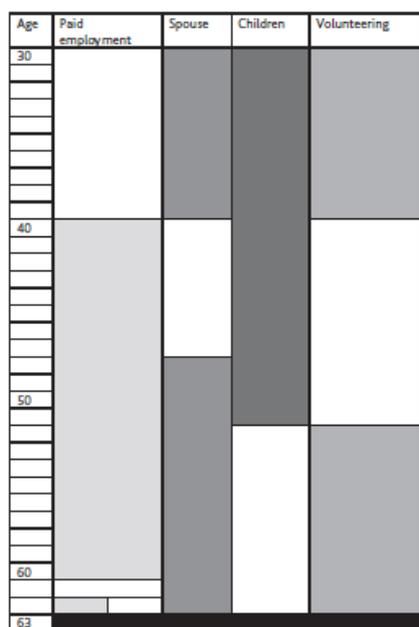


Figure 5: Grace’s lifecourse map

Grace remarried around 8 years after her divorce, and remains married, meaning that domestic responsibilities could once again be shared. Around this time, and while running her business, Grace resumed volunteering by joining local health committees, sharing the benefits of her experience – the first volunteering she had done since her divorce: “While I was proprietor I was on various panels within the local authority. And so I was quite lucky and I was able to use what I’d learnt and put them

[sic] into use by being on these panels and helping the local authority to grow and offer more support for the elderly.”

This link with her skills and experience from paid work is similar to Eric’s situation, and again Grace continued with volunteering on these panels until her retirement, when she sold her business.

Following her retirement, for a few months Grace took a complete break from volunteering, but shortly after she started volunteering at a support organisation for older people, first as a trustee and then soon as an advocate:

“When I retired after a few months they advertised in the paper for a trustee, and so I thought that’s a good idea, I could go, I could get back into using my skills for that. So I wrote to [the manager] and went in to meet her and they accepted me on the board of trustees. And then from there I became an advocate.”

As well as taking on this new voluntary role in retirement, after a year away from paid employment, Grace decided to take on a part-time paid job in a retail company, as shown in Figure 5 by a half-width column after a short gap. Part-time paid work and volunteering with the support organisation for older people are said by Grace to be providing a structure to her week.

Grace, having been divorced, was mirrored by over half of the serial volunteers who participated in this research, while only two out of eight of the serial volunteers had worked full time, uninterrupted, up until retirement. While for the constant volunteers, stability in life as a whole had been mirrored by the stability of volunteering, for Grace and other serial volunteers it was instability in life that was mirrored by instability in volunteering. It may well be that, were it not for interruptions caused by divorce, family commitments, paid employment and other factors, Grace and many other serial volunteers would have been constant volunteers.

Trigger volunteers

Trigger volunteers are those individuals whose first experiences of volunteering have come in older age. Trigger volunteers were the most heterogeneous of the three groups of volunteers in terms of their wider lifecourse patterns. Some had experienced very stable domestic and professional lives similar to those experienced by constant volunteers, while others had had the unpredictable lives common among serial volunteers. Present for all trigger volunteers was, however, the trigger – some reason or pull factor that had led them to begin volunteering. Such triggers came from a diverse range of sources, with no two routes into volunteering the same. Of the older volunteers who participated in this research, 10 were trigger volunteers – five men and five women.

A common reason given by trigger volunteers for not having previously engaged in volunteering was a lack of time while in full-time paid employment. This is unsurprising – UK data show that 60% of those who do not volunteer but wish to cite a lack of time as the main reason why they are unable to (Low et al, 2007). The majority of the trigger volunteers in this sample (eight out of the 10), as shown in Figure 6, had been in full-time paid employment up until retirement, while a further one had been a full-time carer. These commitments give some credence to the lack of time argument, although given that constant volunteers used the structure of stable employment (alongside stable domestic lives) to support stable volunteering, this argument cannot be the full picture. It is more likely that a perceived lack of time is a more important factor, just as Breeze and Lloyd (2013) find is the case when it comes to perceptions of wealth and the ability to give of major philanthropic donors.

Jack is an example of a trigger volunteer whose busy life meant that he did not feel he could commit to any volunteering prior to his retirement. Jack has lived with his wife since leaving university some 50 years ago, as shown in Figure 7. They adopted their two children in their mid-thirties. Jack did not volunteer prior to his retirement from paid employment, although his church attendance and being an adoptive parent suggest that he was engaged in what could be broadly conceived as ‘prosocial activities’, but in retirement has volunteered with three organisations:

- a church group – 15 years and ongoing;

- a local school – for around seven years from his late fifties;
- a homeless support organisation – for 10 years and ongoing.

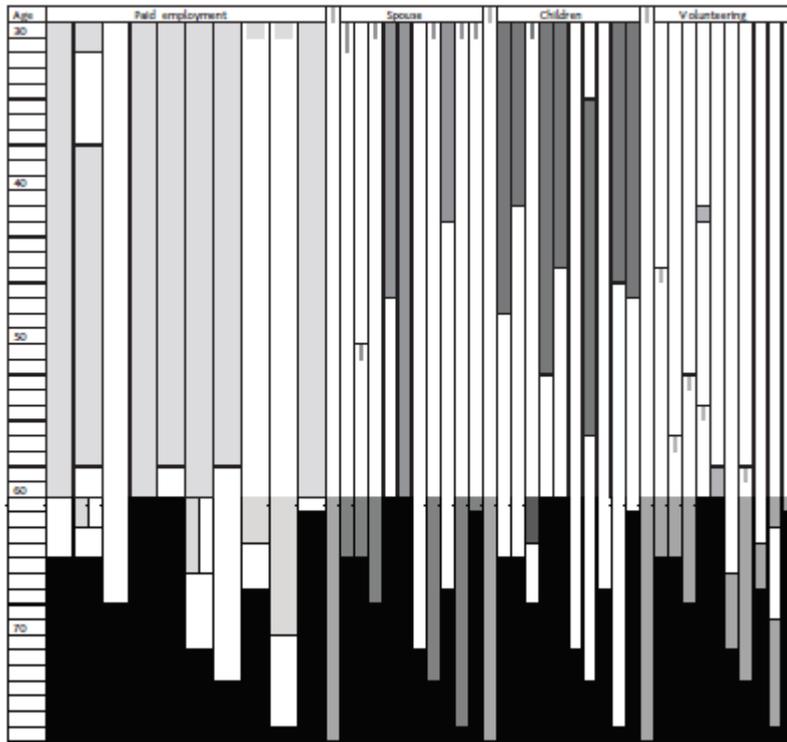


Figure 6: Lifecourse maps of the trigger volunteers

Throughout his working life, Jack worked in a managerial role in a large manufacturing organisation. He noted that during the period of his life when he was in paid employment, he worked such long hours that he was not able to spend as much time with his children as he wished:

“We adopted our two children and when writing to the adoption society I remember saying I should put their interests ahead of my career, and I meant that very strongly, and yet I realise I’m not kind of following that through truthfully, I’m actually not there to be reading the stories in bed sometimes.”

The feeling that Jack was not able to spend as much time with his family as he wished meant that the times that Jack was able to make space from his paid employment, he spent this with his family, rather than volunteering.

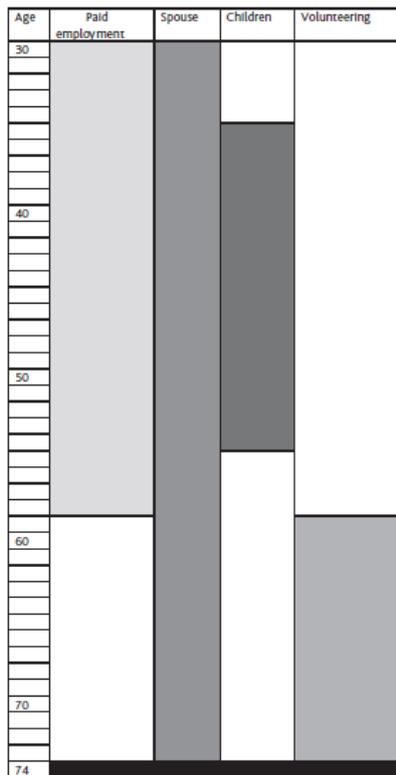


Figure 7: Jack's lifecourse map

Jack took early retirement at the age of 59, and now that paid employment was not placing demands on his time, and with his children grown up and living away from home, he planned to begin volunteering: "The idea was that I could in retirement be more socially involved with help, and I was really looking forward to that and of course that's then what transpired." The first volunteering that Jack did following his retirement was to offer to run groups within his church – of which he had been a member since young adulthood, but which he only began volunteering with in older age, following his retirement – as well as to offer to help at a local primary school:

"I initially went and helped in the local school. I am a pianist, so I volunteered to help in their morning assembly at the primary school, and I was invited then to actually take the morning assembly and give a little talk, with a= Christian bias, it was a C of E [Church of England] school."

Jack also, through a contact at his church, began volunteering with a homeless support organisation around five years after retirement, and has remained volunteering with them until the present, a commitment that involves providing meals and support for homeless people one night a month. The volunteering at the school, however, stopped when Jack's wife suggested that he might like to volunteer a bit less and spend a bit more time with her: "What I need to say to you though is that your family always comes first, and you find so often, you know, your wife will say 'you're spending more time on that than with me'."

While Jack's domestic situation has been stable, it has not necessarily been supportive to him volunteering – pressures from work and from his wife and children have led to him feeling that prior to retirement he did not have the capacity to engage.

Discussion and conclusion

Recognising the ways in which individuals engage in formal volunteering across the lifecourse and into older age is vital both to our understanding of volunteering and to engaging and retaining older adults as volunteers. The detailed exploration of how individuals engage in formal volunteering over the course of their lives that this article presents develops significantly our understanding of the situated practices of volunteering and how these are shaped by lifecourse experiences. The major

contribution of this work is that volunteering cannot and should not be seen as being an activity distinct from the other work and non-work roles that individuals undertake and negotiate over their lives. Nor should the individual factors that make up this wider context – paid work, marital status, divorce, parenthood – be seen as isolated facilitators and constraints of volunteering. Instead, this article shows that it should be understood as being highly situated within the rhythms and relations of everyday life. As the case studies of Eric, Grace and Jack show, volunteering, paid work and family life interact with one another in complex and changing ways across the lifecourse. This article allows these to be understood side by side – to see how having a spouse and paid work, for example, have a clear relationship, which in turn impacts on engagement in volunteering. This approach gives us a more nuanced understanding of when and how people volunteer than previous work has been able to.

Constant volunteers, as Eric's example shows, have volunteered across their lifecourse and into older age. Many of those in the present study were volunteering prior to marriage and parenthood, and their volunteering has as a result been a central part of their adult life and relationships they have built. Their commitment to volunteering has often been shared by their spouse, be it volunteering together or separately. This is not to say that the commitment that constant volunteers have been able to provide through their volunteering has itself been constant. They too find that life gets in the way and, as Eric's example shows, they have periods of intense activity and periods where their involvement is relatively minor. For serial volunteers such as Grace, this commitment to volunteering may have been present in younger age, but life events and other commitments have meant that they have stopped volunteering, before resuming in older age. Changes in engagement in formal volunteering have often been the result of external factors – family commitments, paid work and unexpected events – and re-engagement has often reflected changes in these in older age. Many serial volunteers, were it not for these life events and other commitments, may have been constant volunteers. Changing circumstances in which volunteering can take place are also significant for trigger volunteers – those individuals with no history of volunteering prior to retirement. Jack's example shows how withdrawal from paid employment and/or diminished day-to-day childcare responsibilities can create space for individuals to engage for the first time, so long as the trigger is there. The trigger may well have been present previously – in Jack's case he had previously been asked to volunteer – so the trigger itself is less important to the circumstances that facilitate volunteering at that time.

Policies and schemes to encourage participation in formal volunteering by older adults need therefore to recognise that individuals engage in different ways. For constant volunteers, organisations may need to find ways to allow more flexible volunteering post-retirement, when an individual's time may not be structured so rigidly but when they might be keen to give more time than previously. Further, the nature of the volunteering – within the same organisation – that a constant volunteer wishes to undertake may change in older age, and organisations need to be sensitive to this. For serial volunteers, policies and schemes need to be aimed at getting individuals who have stopped volunteering to re-engage. This involves recognising the events that can push individuals back into volunteering and sensitively making individuals aware of volunteering opportunities around these times; children leaving home and retirement both emerged from this research as times when serial volunteers re-engage. Around these key events, voluntary organisations should be aware that a request to volunteer – by far the most common way people come to engage (Low et al, 2007) – is more likely to receive a positive response at these times than other times. For trigger volunteers, it is also about recognising the changes in individuals' lives that may make them able to engage in formal volunteering for the first time, and making sure that at these stages in the lifecourse individuals are aware of the volunteering opportunities available and of the benefits of volunteering that other individuals have experienced. The triggers and the ways in which organisations can take advantage of them are similar to many of those that encourage serial volunteers to re-engage, although in some cases more encouragement may be needed given that for trigger volunteers this is their first experience of volunteering.

Further to these applied conclusions, knowing that volunteering can only be understood when situated within a broad range of other activities and over the lifecourse challenges how we research volunteering. Rather than focus, as much research does, on volunteer motivations, this article presents

a call to instead view how individuals come to be volunteering *in the round*. Motivations to volunteer are important. Pathways into volunteering too are important, as we know that being asked is the most significant route into volunteering (Low et al, 2007). This article has shown that context is also important. A highly motivated individual, asked regularly to volunteer, will still not engage if the other commitments they have – to paid work, to their family and to a range of other factors not considered here – prevent them from doing so. If the circumstances allow, potentially all volunteers could be constant volunteers. As the case study of Grace shows, the reasons for her being a serial rather than a constant volunteer are that life gets in the way. Divorce, childcare and paid work are all highlighted by Grace as reasons for stopping volunteering, yet at a previous stage of life when Grace had a more stable domestic life, having children acted as a motivation to volunteer. Jack's case study too shows how he would have liked to have engaged earlier than his trigger event if his domestic commitments and paid employment had allowed him to – unlike Grace, he did not volunteer alongside activities his children engaged in. Overall, it seems likely that the trigger is not as important as the impact of other commitments.

Knowing that at different life stages, volunteers may be able to offer their time, skills and efforts in different ways – facilitated or constrained by their other roles – furthers our understanding of volunteering and challenges researchers and practitioners to situate their volunteering research within people's lives. It makes it clear that to better understand volunteering we need to view it not as an activity apart from others, but as something that is by nature embedded in a far wider context of social relations. There is a wide range of life events and circumstances that facilitate and constrain volunteering and the approach offered in this article allows them to be understood side by side, to explore their impact in the round. If paid work and domestic lives become more precarious, less stable, this research suggests that there will be fewer constant volunteers and more serial and trigger volunteers. Very probably there will be more non-volunteers as well. As a result, this research presents a challenge to future research to examine how the impact of more unstable lives on volunteering can be limited.

This research, and the conclusions drawn from it, are not without their limitations. While looking at the impact of paid work, partners and children from a lifecourse perspective extends our understanding of the context of volunteering, there are many other factors that could have been considered. Indeed, within those aspects considered there is a huge heterogeneity in experiences of paid work, cohabitation and parenthood, which the lifecourse maps cannot capture. Any map is a representation, of course, but certainly the method of representing could be refined further. Further, there are areas that have proved beyond the scope of this article but need to be explored further elsewhere. How, for example, does context interact with motivation? What is the impact of social class on how other factors affect engagement in volunteering? The lifecourse approach, using a further refined lifecourse mapping approach, would enable these questions to be answered.

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