Philanthropy includes the giving of time as well as the giving of money, and this paper focusses on understanding patterns of this type of philanthropic behaviour across the life course. It explores the way in which modelling volunteer lifecourses using qualitative biographical data can allow us to understand different types of volunteer journey. Adopting a feminist approach which calls for the understanding of the interrelations between different types of work (Glucksmann, 2000; 2005; Taylor, 2005) and between different stages of life (Hareven and Adams, 1982; Katz and Monk, 1993), this paper introduces three distinct categories of volunteer journey (Davis Smith and Gay, 2005) across the life course. Constant volunteers are those who volunteer throughout adult life and into older age; serial volunteers are those whose volunteering stops and starts over the life course and continues into or resumes in older age and; trigger volunteers are those whose first experience of volunteering comes in older age. These different patterns of voluntary engagement are situated within the context of engagement with paid employment and of domestic responsibilities. Using qualitative biographical data to model visually the journeys that individual volunteers undertake across the life course, the three types of volunteering pattern identified by Davis Smith and Gay (2005) can be explored further. The impact of certain life patterns and life events – parenthood, divorce, career trajectories and changes, retirement, widowhood – can be observed in context, the impact on different individuals understood separately and alongside. While all volunteers are unique, modelling allows patterns to emerge which can be explored further using the qualitative biographies from which they are drawn. Understanding these patterns and the similarities between volunteers’ journeys better equips volunteer managers and students of volunteering to understand volunteer decisions at different times across the life course.

Twenty-eight qualitative biographical lifecourse interviews were conducted with volunteers aged between 55 and 85 in England during 2010 and 2011. From these, a lifecourse model was produced for each volunteer which showed their engagement in volunteering alongside their paid employment and domestic situation (the presence of a spouse and/or children). These models were grouped according to patterns of engagement in formal volunteering and composite models were produced which allowed patterns in other work commitments among grouped volunteers to be observed.

In 2005, Justin Davis Smith and Pat Gay proposed three categories of older volunteer: constant volunteers have volunteered for the same organisation for most or all of their adult life; serial volunteers have volunteered intermittently and for different organisations over their adult life and; trigger volunteers only begin volunteering in older age. My research has added to this knowledge by
identifying broader life patterns which influence these three categories of volunteer in different ways;

• Constant volunteers generally have lived fairly stable lives. They are unlikely to have been widowed or divorced and they are likely to have had fairly consistent career patterns in paid employment. In short, the stability in their lives as a whole enables stability of volunteering.

• Serial volunteers often have far more chaotic lives. Divorce and widowhood affect the ability of an individual to give up their time to volunteer. For women in particularly, having children and leaving paid employment temporarily impacts on the extent and nature of engagement in formal volunteering.

• Trigger volunteers are a far less homogenous group. Some have had very stable lives prior to volunteering, others highly chaotic. The one link is that they all experienced some event – retirement, widowhood, even simply seeing a particular news article – which results in them being encouraged to volunteer.

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References

Davis Smith, J. and Gay, P. (2005), Active Aging in Active Communities, Bristol: The Policy Press.


