Longitudinal studies of voluntary action in the UK: a mixed-methods panel

This panel presents results from projects conducted by researchers based in or associated with the UK Third Sector Research Centre (www.tsrc.ac.uk) which have engaged with longitudinal analysis of the extent and character of voluntary activity in the UK drawing on both quantitative and qualitative sources. There is considerable academic and policy interest in this question. In particular, in the UK at present time, voluntary action is presented as a panacea for a number of social challenges: a route into employability, a source of well-being, and a generator of social capital. Longitudinal research allows us to investigate some of these claims. Research in the centre has analysed cohort variations in voluntary action and in participation in associations, while we have also investigated links between voluntary action and employability, and are currently focussing attention on links between volunteering, as measured through various surveys, and wellbeing.

The panel offers longitudinal studies based on a rich range of sources including some that permit mixed-methods consideration of topics in a manner which, we believe, is not otherwise possible.

The first paper, by Daiga Kamerade, uses the British Household Panel Study to follow individuals’ patterns of activity in voluntary associations between 1991 and 2009. It demonstrates, in contrast to the relative stability of volunteering as revealed through cross-sectional surveys, a considerable amount of movement in and out of associational participation. Only a relatively small proportion of the British population have never actually engaged in associations over the whole of this 18-year period. This has implications for our understanding of voluntarism particularly given the prominence in policy debates accorded to headline figures from cross-sectional surveys.

The second paper, by Bolton, explores the hypothesised connection between voluntary action and political engagement. Her project uses several of the U.K.’s longitudinal studies as resources for investigating the connection between volunteering and political activity and engagement. The substantive concern is whether involvement in voluntary activity is positively associated, controlling for individual characteristics, with subsequent political activity. In the context of UK policies such as the National Citizen Service scheme, which stress the benefits of voluntary action in terms of promoting higher levels of citizen engagement in the democratic process, this project is highly topical.

These papers draw upon the U.K.’s highly regarded longitudinal surveys, but a criticism of such sources could be that, due to the complexity of their survey instruments and the range of topics that they must examine, there is limited scope for in-depth probing of the meaning of voluntary action to respondents. To redress this imbalance, we present findings from two other qualitative studies. Recognising the limitations of questions in one of these, the National Child Development Study (which is a cohort study of a group of individuals born during 1958), a subset of respondents was contacted at age 50 in 2008 and 220 agreed to participate in qualitative interview, exploring in more depth several dimensions of their activities. This included work on social participation, and we can therefore see the extent to which what individuals report in the quantitative survey was corroborated by their responses to the qualitative interviews. We are not aware of any other study in Britain that is able to do this.

Our third paper, by Bolton, Brookfield et al., therefore investigates reports of participation from both qualitative and quantitative sources for the same individuals, and shows that both sources offer more or less subjective interpretations of voluntary activity. However, individuals that appear very similar in terms of patterns of participation when looked at through the lens of the quantitative surveys demonstrate very different levels of engagement when their qualitative responses are considered.

Finally, Lindsey et al exploit the somewhat under-used Mass Observation archive to investigate individuals’ attitudes to and participation in voluntary organisations, and how these have changed over a 30-year period. Mass Observation recruits volunteer writers and asks them to respond to directives about social issues; since the early 1980s a series of directives have explored relevant topics, and a number of respondents have been identified who have responded consistently. This is therefore an unusual opportunity to explore, in a non-retrospective way, what individuals
thought at the time, and in addition, the numbers of respondents to our selected directives (e.g. on voluntary association membership, or unpaid work) allow comparison with survey data gathered at or about the same time.

**Reflexive, not committed: longitudinal patterns of individuals’ involvement in voluntary associations in Great Britain**

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Although numerous studies have examined activity in voluntary associations, little research has focused on individuals’ movement into and out of voluntary associations. Using the analytical framework for understanding and examining contemporary volunteering proposed by Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) this study examines the sociological thesis that involvement in voluntary associations is gaining a fundamentally new quality as a result of broader social and cultural changes. Compared to traditional committed volunteering, modern volunteering is hypothesised to be irregular, brief and non-committed. However, although the changing nature of volunteering has been widely discussed, so far, few attempts have been made to examine the patterns of modern volunteering. These attempts have usually been confined to relatively small scale studies of volunteer movements in and out of a small number of particular organisations (e.g. Hustinx, 2005). We know little about national levels movement patterns: how many people are continuously volunteering, how many volunteer only once or do it intermittently. In particular, we know little about volunteering dynamics in different types of voluntary associations and movement between different types. This study aims to reduce this gap in knowledge and it examines the extent to which adults in Great Britain have traditional committed and modern, so called reflexive, patterns of activity in voluntary associations. To do that this paper used British Household Panel Survey data that follow individuals’ patterns of activity in voluntary associations between 1991 and 2009. A nationally representative sample of 3,983 individuals, who were at least 16 years old in 1991 and who provided responses to the voluntary affiliation questions in all waves between 1991 and 2009 was used in this study. The longitudinal activity pattern analysis shows that the aggregate rates of volunteering in Great Britain have been stable for at least two decades and suggests that around half of adults in Great Britain can be classified as ‘non-volunteers’ at each point in time. However, behind this apparent stability this study also uncovers considerable movement of individuals into and out of volunteering and between different types of associations. Only a relatively small proportion of British have never volunteered between 1991 and 2009. This study finds that individuals in Great Britain are more committed to activity in voluntary associations in general than to one particular types of association. In general, they are not committed to activity in one particular association or type of associations and tend to change the type of association (which also means- the association itself) frequently. These findings suggest that at least in Great Britain, the reflexive type of volunteering indeed strongly predominates among adults and thus provides an empirical support for the modern reflexive volunteering hypothesis. Implications of these findings for policy, practice of managing volunteers and sociological theory are discussed in the paper.

**What a difference a day makes: mixed methods research on social participation in the 1958 British birth cohort**

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This innovative mixed methods study includes an analysis of a little-used qualitative research
database connected to the 1958 British birth cohort survey, the National Child Development Study (NCDS). In 2008, 220 of the approximately 10,000 individuals still participating in the main study were sampled for a semi-structured qualitative interview about social participation. These 220 interviews are linked to the 50 years of NCDS data on each individual to allow analysis of different ‘stories’ of participation. Our paper is the result of a focused project concentrating on fifty of these interviews.

We draw out the differences between quantitative and qualitative measures of volunteering and other types of civic and social participation. Although quantitative and qualitative methods reveal different information about respondents' participatory behaviours, we find no clear blue water between the methods: both offer more or less subjective interpretations of volunteering, for example. A direct quantitative survey question about volunteering or voluntary work seems to impose the questioner’s interpretation upon the respondent, but it is clear from this data that interpretations can differ widely, even within the quantitative data. During some of the qualitative interviews, similar language to that found in the quantitative surveys was used to prompt interviewees to answer more fully. The different narratives revealed, and the ways in which interviewees either pick up or reject the vocabulary of volunteering and participation offered by the interviewers are very revealing.

Our paper also examines the evolution of the NCDS quantitative questionnaires over the period. The survey questions on volunteering or voluntary work are very different – some might argue non-comparable – between waves of data collection. In later waves, the focus on voluntary action through formal groups or associations seems to have excluded some stories of participation, particularly those which are primarily episodic: these have been more efficiently captured in the qualitative data. The 'membership hurdle' also completely excludes some common forms of participation such as evening or exercise classes. The role of religion and the church in prompting voluntary action is highlighted here. Churchgoers may or may not identify as “members”, and this results in some volunteering being missed by this type of survey instrument. Through the two types of data collection, churchgoers are revealed as a very diverse group in terms of social participation. For some, their participation is limited to service attendance, while others volunteer several days a week, both formally and informally. In spite of these crucial differences, such individuals can look very similar to one another when viewed only through the lens survey data.

The histories of participation that we find in these data highlight the importance of life events in a person's participatory story. This is revealed perhaps most clearly in the qualitative interviews, which give the respondents the opportunity to reflect on how their participation has been shaped by events like illness or changes in employment. Although the quantitative data contains information about such major life events, it is difficult to draw conclusions about how these events might have affected social participation. In part, this is because of the long gaps between the waves of data collection. Another key difficulty is one of interpretation: it is clear from the qualitative data that different individuals react in very different ways to apparently similar stimuli.

A mixed-methods, longitudinal study of volunteering in the UK since 1981: comparing periods of economic adversity and relative prosperity

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This paper will present findings from a mixed-method, longitudinal project investigating volunteering in the UK through 1981-2012. This is a timeframe which includes two periods of economic adversity and one of relative prosperity. The project has combined qualitative data from the Mass Observation Archive Project, a voluntary writing project where people write freely on topics such as voluntary unpaid work, welfare, and views on the state's responsibility for the provision of public services, with existing quantitative data on individuals’ engagement, as found
in the British Household Panel Survey/ Understanding Society, the General Lifestyle Survey and the British Social Attitudes Survey.

Mass Observation can best be described as a “citizen writing” project. It takes qualitative snapshots of the public’s views on a range of topics by recruiting a panel of potential writers, and several times a year these individuals are sent “directives” which pose questions about and offer them prompts upon particular topics. Typically between 2-300 responses are received; they usually take the form of free text, often several hundred words in length. We have identified a number of directives which touch upon voluntary action and unpaid work undertaken by respondents, as well as membership of and participation in voluntary organisations, and attitudes to the role of the voluntary sector in delivering welfare services. Since individual respondents are given a unique identifier, we have been able to construct a longitudinal panel of observations by selecting responses contributed by 40 engaged individuals over the course of 30 years. Using this rich qualitative material, the paper explores changes and continuities in these individual's attitudes towards volunteering, their volunteering behaviour, and their views on the State's responsibility for the provision of public services over this timeframe. While our respondents are not in any sense a statistically representative sample of the population - by definition, they are among the more civically-engaged sections of the community who have the capacity and skills to write response to directives of this kind - nevertheless they do provide a valuable perspective on how individuals attitudes have changed as they have lived through this period of history. We also provide context for these findings with analysis of quantitative panel data from the same timeframe - for example, for a directive on unpaid work from the mid-1990s we would examine relevant survey data (e.g. the BHPS) gathered contemporaneously.

The current UK administration is in the process of withdrawing public services and welfare provision, and placing responsibility on individuals and communities to meet local needs through voluntary effort; a process that has been of interest internationally to other administrations implementing austerity measures. We also commissioned a directive to explore individual's views about the UK Coalition government's “Big Society” policies early in 2012, which allows us to present some nuanced views on this topic just at a time when the government's austerity measures were beginning to take effect. This piece of research, which explores individual and community capacity for, and interest in, this call to engagement is, therefore, both timely and highly policy relevant.