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**An Untapped Pool of Volunteers for the Big Society? Not Enough Social  
Capital? Depends on How You Measure It....**

**(This paper is currently under review)**

### **Abstract**

The key factor in determining the success of the Big Society in the UK is the availability of volunteers. How large is the pool of adults in Great Britain not already volunteering? To answer this question this paper adopts an under-utilised dynamic approach to measuring volunteering and compares its results to the more commonly used cross-sectional approach. Using longitudinal data from the British Household Survey, this paper finds considerable movement of individuals into and out of volunteering. The results show the vast majority of British adults have volunteered at least once and most of them do it repeatedly. Consequently the untapped pool of individuals who have never volunteered is significantly smaller than cross-sectional analysis suggests. This study recommends that Big Society policy should therefore give greater emphasis to retaining and re-engaging its existing volunteers and less emphasis to recruiting people who have never volunteered.

**Key words:** volunteering, Big Society, social capital, longitudinal

Since he came to power in 2010, the British Prime Minister David Cameron has promoted the idea of a Big Society, where individuals take greater responsibility from the government for solving various societal problems and providing some public services, for example, local transport, libraries and social housing (Cameron, 2010). The core themes of the Big Society agenda are empowering communities, reforming public services so that more are provided by charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives, and promoting a volunteering culture that encourages and enables people to play a more active part in society (Alcock, 2010; Cabinet Office, 2011a). The Big Society idea echoes the social capital theory which has been widely debated among social scientists and policymakers alike since Putnam's (2000) influential book on the decline of social capital in the USA. Like the social capital theory, the Big Society assumes that individuals' involvements in social networks - and their volunteering in particular - provides a solution for a wide variety of societal problems and improves people's lives.

Much of the Big Society agenda's success relies on the contribution of volunteers: people who give their time and work for no financial reward. The size of the voluntary workforce therefore becomes critical in assessing whether the vision of the Big Society can become a reality. The Big Society agenda implies that there is an urgent need to increase levels of volunteering in Britain and that there is an untapped pool of individuals not yet involved in the Big Society who should be persuaded to become involved. For example, the government's 'Giving Green Paper' argues that volunteering levels in the UK should be increased because the British devote relatively little time to voluntary work (Cabinet Office, 2010b). Estimating the pool of potential volunteers for the Big Society Pattie and Johnson (2011) have also expressed concern over the availability of likely candidates. They show that in 2010 only 44% of individuals in Britain reported involvement in a voluntary organisation and only 12% were volunteering in local politics or community affairs. Other indicators of

these implicit assumptions are that the Big Society agenda is focused exclusively on ‘enabling’ and ‘encouraging’ higher levels of participation in community, volunteering, charitable giving, and the ‘creation of neighbourhood groups’ rather than supporting and retaining those already contributing. These assumptions especially refer to particular groups in society, such as younger people and individuals living in deprived areas, which traditionally have lower levels of involvement and therefore are a particular target group for the Big Society agenda (Cabinet Office, 2010a, 2011b).

Until now the extent of volunteering in Britain and other countries has been measured using the so-called ‘static approach’. The static approach uses cross-sectional data to estimate the extent of volunteering by measuring how many people have reported involvement in voluntary associations at a certain point in time and thus divides the population into ‘volunteers’ and ‘non-volunteers’. This approach has generated the results which have helped form the view that volunteering levels are too low and that greater recruitment of volunteers is needed.

This paper argues that although the static approach offers valuable insights into volunteering, it oversimplifies volunteering behaviour by ignoring years of individuals ‘volunteering history’. The static approach underestimates the level of volunteering in a country or among certain groups in society, which can lead to poorly focused policy decisions.

By contrast, this paper, based on the life course approach, advocates an alternative - a ‘dynamic approach’ – as a more informative and accurate method of measuring involvement in voluntary associations. Instead of dividing individuals into ‘volunteers’ and ‘non-volunteers’, this approach considers individual longitudinal patterns of volunteering over a longer period of time. This approach can produce more accurate estimates of the levels of volunteering and a more complex picture of involvement in voluntary associations.

The aim of this paper is to contrast the traditional static perspective with the dynamic approach to demonstrate the advantages of using the dynamic approach to measure volunteering. The main research questions are these: how do estimates of the extent of volunteering differ when using the static approach and the dynamic approach? How do the differences in the cross-sectional rates of volunteering between different socio-economic groups relate to the differences in their individual longitudinal patterns of volunteering? To answer these questions this paper uses data from the British Household Panel Survey for the period between 1991 and 2007.

### **The Dynamic Approach to Measuring Volunteering**

In advocating the dynamic approach to the measurement of volunteering this paper employs the life course approach. The life course is defined as ‘a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time’ (Giele & Elder, 1998, p.22). The life course approach suggests that as individuals progress through their lives, they experience different transitions in their roles, statuses and resources. For example, they get married, become parents, start a new job or become unemployed, become rich or poor. Often a change in one domain of life can prompt change in another. Becoming a mother is often associated with stopping paid work for a while with a consequent reduction in personal income.

Numerous studies have found that life transitions, and changes in roles and resources in particular, can induce changes in a person’s involvement in voluntary associations. For example, using retrospectively collected histories of membership in voluntary associations from a representative sample of adults living in Nebraska (USA), Rotolo (2000), found that getting married increases men’s likelihood of joining a voluntary association and reduces the likelihood of both men and women stopping their membership. Butrica et al. (2009) in a nationally representative sample of older Americans found that older people are more likely to stop volunteering after they have become widowed. Changes in work also can affect

volunteering. For example, retiring from or stopping work increased the likelihood of volunteering in a sample of older Americans (Mutchler, 2003).

Roles that change over the course of life are not the only determining factors affecting voluntary affiliation. Resources play a significant part too. It's simply not enough for individuals to want to become involved in volunteering and to be informed about opportunities for involvement. Individuals need time, money, skills, social networks, health and other resources for active involvement (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Tang, 2006; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Therefore changes in resources can affect an individual's volunteering behaviour. For example, Butrica et al.(2009) showed that older Americans were less likely to stop volunteering if their health improved. Similarly, Kohli et al. (2009) found that older Europeans in twelve countries were more likely to stop volunteering and less likely to start if their health had declined.

Based on the assumption that most adults are likely to experience several role transitions or changes in resources during their life course, which in turn can have an impact on them joining or leaving voluntary work, we can hypothesise that a person's involvement in voluntary associations is a dynamic process and that many individuals repeatedly move into and out of voluntary associations (*Hypothesis 1*).

Indeed some basic exploratory analyses of the dynamics of volunteering already provide some support for this hypothesis. For example, Butrica et al. (2009) measured volunteering status five times between 1996 and 2004 using a nationally representative sample of older Americans. They found that approximately 40% of Americans aged 55-65 did not volunteer in any of the measurement occasions, 15% volunteered only once, 16% volunteered in all waves, but 29% reported volunteering sporadically: some twice, others three or four times. Similarly, Wilson (2005) using The National Longitudinal Survey of Labour Market Experiences (1967-1984) showed that behind an apparent stability in the

cross-sectional rate of volunteering (28%), there was a high movement of women into and out of volunteering; as many as 56% of whom volunteered at least once. In Britain, Li et al. (2002) also found that behind an apparent stability in the cross-sectional rates of membership in voluntary associations between 1991 and 1995 there was a high movement of individuals into and out of these groups.

Taking into account this dynamic nature of volunteering, this paper firstly argues that to reach a more accurate estimate of the extent of volunteering (and therefore also social capital and the size of the Big Society) it is not enough to measure volunteering at a certain point in time. It is also necessary to examine individual longitudinal patterns of volunteering over a longer period of time.

The reason for this is that the static approach using cross-sectional estimates oversimplifies the volunteering patterns of individuals. As McPherson (1981) and later Rotolo (2000) have suggested, if somebody has reported not volunteering at a certain point in time, s/he might have never volunteered, or might be a committed volunteer to this point but has temporarily stopped volunteering at this specific moment.

Therefore, taking into account the dynamics of volunteering, it could be hypothesized that the static approach to volunteering fails to take account of the transitional nature of voluntary activity through the volunteer's life and therefore underestimates the levels of volunteering (*Hypothesis 2*). As Li et al. (2002, para 5.6) have pointed out: 'Though many are not active at a given time, they are probably neither hostile to membership nor unavailable for mobilisation through organizations should an appropriate occasion arise...[] the weak ties developed during a bout of membership will not immediately erode, such that individuals will be better connected than might be imagined from considering only the total volume available to them at any one time'. Therefore measuring and distinguishing between



different long-term volunteering patterns might provide a more accurate way of estimating the extent of volunteering.

The knowledge of individual longitudinal patterns of volunteering is also crucial for a more thorough understanding of the differences in volunteering extent across various socio-economic groups. According to McPherson (1981) the understanding of longitudinal patterns of voluntary affiliation can help explain the differences in cross-sectional rates of voluntary affiliation at the group, organisational and national level. For example, McPherson (1981) found that working class individuals tend to have lower membership rates not only because they are less likely to join voluntary associations, but also because they tend to stay involved for shorter periods than middle class individuals. Therefore another hypothesis can be proposed: the differences in cross-sectional rates of volunteering across various socio-economic groups can be a result of the different longitudinal volunteering patterns, not only of being less likely to join voluntary associations (*Hypothesis 3*)

The dynamic approach to social capital also offers valuable insights for policy makers, especially those concerned with the Big Society agenda. The knowledge and understanding of individual longitudinal patterns of volunteering is crucial for the design and evaluation of effective volunteer recruitment and retention policies.

For many years, the most common assumption between social capital theorists and policymakers has been that involvement in voluntary associations (a proxy measure for social capital) is too low and declining because individuals are increasingly less likely to join voluntary associations (Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1995, 2000). This assumption has so far been based on predominantly cross-sectional analyses that measure volunteering at one point in time. According to this assumption, the only remedy for declining or insufficient involvement rates is to encourage more people to become involved in associations.

As a result the main focus of the policymakers, including those who developed the Big Society agenda, has until this point been on recruitment: how to identify the people who do not get involved, discover the barriers preventing their involvement and find solutions that will 'encourage' and 'enable' them to participate more.

But seen through the prism of the dynamic approach, this paper argues that the extent of volunteering could be low not only because individuals do not join voluntary associations in sufficient numbers but also because most of them are involved intermittently. In other words, they join a voluntary group, stay for a while then leave, possibly returning after a certain period of inactivity, which may be due to changes in role, status or resources. Seen from this perspective a large percentage of the population is already mobilised, socially well networked or motivated to volunteer, though the cross-sectional rates are low. In these circumstances a policy strategy aimed at persuading individuals to join voluntary associations might not be as appropriate and efficient as a strategy focused on increasing the duration of their involvement. That is, switching effort to the retention of existing volunteers.

Why have the individual longitudinal dynamics of volunteering been overlooked until now, when the theoretical and practical significance of this perspective offers such a different view of volunteer activity over life-time, and consequently suggests a different strategic approach to mobilising volunteers? The answer is simple: a lack of suitable data. To examine individuals' longitudinal patterns of volunteering a good quality longitudinal panel data collected over a large period of time are needed. Such data, including measurements of volunteering, are still scarce.

The aim of this paper is to reduce this gap by examining individual longitudinal patterns of volunteering by contrasting the dynamic approach to the measurement of volunteering with the static. The research questions asked in this paper are: how do estimates of the extent of social capital compare when they are obtained using the static approach

against the dynamic approach? How do the differences in the cross-sectional rates of social capital between different socio-economic groups relate to the differences in their individual longitudinal patterns of volunteering? This paper focuses on four socio-economic predictors of volunteering: age, income, gender and social class. These predictors - especially social class - are the commonly used predictors of social capital and involvement in voluntary associations (e.g. Hall, 1999; Li et al., 2002; Warde et al., 2003). Traditionally the level of education is used to explain involvement in voluntary associations (e.g. Gesthuizen & Scheepers, 2011) but is not included in this study, because in Britain education is highly correlated with social class (for example see Ianneli, 2007). The inclusion of education along with social class would create a problem of multicollinearity.

Neither does this study employ a particular definition of volunteering or of activity in voluntary associations. This is because most of the empirical research reviewed in this paper, as well as the secondary data used in this study, are based on an individual's self-definition of voluntary associations and their activity in them.

### **Data**

To examine the individual dynamics of volunteering in voluntary associations, this paper employs a secondary data analysis of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). The BHPS is a large, high quality nationally representative longitudinal panel survey which has been conducted by the ESRC UK Longitudinal Studies Centre annually since 1991. The sample is a stratified clustered design drawn from the Postcode Address File and all residents present at those addresses in the first wave of the survey were designated as panel members. These same individuals are re-interviewed each successive year and, if they split off from original households to form new households, are followed. Because the individuals have been surveyed repeatedly many times, the BHPS provides a rare opportunity to analyse individual

longitudinal histories of volunteering. Data are collected using face-to-face and telephone interviews and self-completion questionnaires.

## **Sample**

The present study uses a 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 up to 2007. The average age of the individuals in the sample was 41 (SD =18) in 1991 and 55% of the participants were women. The sample used in this paper represents 39% of the initial sample of 10,264 individuals in 1991. In 1991 the response rate was 92%. Afterwards both the permanent and temporary attrition rates were relatively low: approximately 5% a year. To ensure that the sample used in this study remains nationally representative to the population of Great Britain, all analyses in this paper are weighted using the BHPS wave 2007 longitudinal respondent weights which adjust for initial selection probabilities and reduce the bias due to sample attrition.

## **Measurements**

**Volunteering.** In the BHPS volunteering was measured by asking the question: ‘Do you join in the activities of any of these organisations on a regular basis?’ and presenting a list of voluntary groups which included political party, trade union, environmental group, parents’ association, residents’ group, religious group, voluntary service group and other types of voluntary organisations. The answers were coded as a dichotomous variable: as ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Initially, between 1991 and 1995, activity in associations was measured every year but from 1995 only bi-annually, therefore this paper uses only bi-annual measurements.

**Age.** The age of the respondent was measured using the respondent’s year of birth.

**Individual income per year.** This variable measure is the total annual income in British pounds that an individual has received from different sources in a particular year.

**Social class.** To measure social class, this paper used a version of Goldthorpe's (1987) class scheme routinely used in social capital research in Britain (e.g. Li, Savage, & Warde, 2008). This class scheme classifies all individuals into six social classes based on their current occupation (or if unemployed, their last occupation):

- 1) Semi or unskilled manual workers, including agricultural labourers
- 2) Skilled manual working class
- 3) Foreman and technicians
- 4) Petty bourgeoisie: self-employed workers with or without employees
- 5) Routine non-manual employees
- 6) Service class: professionals, administrators and managers.

Semi-unskilled manual workers were used as the comparison category in multivariate analyses because they tend to have the lowest levels of involvement in voluntary associations among social classes.

### **Data analysis methods**

The BHPS data were analysed using cross-sectional and longitudinal descriptive analyses, the sequence analysis and logistic, multiple linear and random coefficient regression analyses<sup>1</sup>.

## **Results**

### **Volunteers vs. non-volunteers: cross-sectional rates of volunteering**

Firstly, the data were analysed using the traditional static approach. This measures the extent of volunteering at a certain point in time, dividing all individuals into volunteers and non-volunteers. The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 1. If we interpret this graph using the traditional static approach there seems to be a relatively large untapped pool of volunteers for the Big Society: approximately half of British adults have reported volunteering at each point of measurement between 1991 and 2007, which leaves another half

classed as 'non-volunteers'. This half translates into approximately 23 million individuals in 2007. According to the static approach they are not part of the Big Society or social capital when measured by participation in voluntary associations.

We can also see that the rate of volunteering has been slightly declining between 1991 and 2007. This decline has been statistically significant. The random coefficient regression coefficient of -0.05 (for a regression model with a constant and year only) indicates that on average in a year the odds of volunteering reduced by about 5% ( $p < 0.001$ ). This again is in line with the declining social capital hypothesis and suggests that policies encouraging more involvement might be needed.

[Figure 1 here]

However, as argued in the literature review, the cross-sectional rates do not reveal the dynamics of volunteering at the individual level: that is, the flow of individuals into and out of associations over time. We cannot tell just by looking at cross-sectional rates how many people were not active in any association between 1991 and 2007 or, in other words, how many truly belong to the untapped pool of volunteers for the Big Society. Neither can we tell how many people continued to volunteer from wave to wave and how many had been volunteering intermittently. Only longitudinal panel data that track each individual's volunteering status over time can reveal the longitudinal story behind cross-sectional patterns and trends, and so provide answers to these questions. The next section of this paper demonstrates the advantages of using longitudinal panel data and analyses individual longitudinal patterns of activity in voluntary associations.

### **Individuals' longitudinal histories of volunteering**

Figure 2 graphically presents longitudinal volunteering patterns for all individuals in the sample using sequence index plot. The sequence index plot draws a horizontal line for each individual representing his or her sequence of volunteering statuses (a volunteering history)

where volunteering is represented with black but non-volunteering with grey. For example, at the top of Figure 2 there is a group of individuals who did not volunteer in all waves between 1991 and 2007 (i.e. all in grey), followed by a small group of individuals who were active only in 2007. At the bottom of Figure 2 is a group of individuals who reported activity in every wave (all in black).

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2 shows that individual longitudinal patterns of volunteering are complex and varied: in total there were 347 different volunteering histories. Also it can be seen that many more individuals have been volunteering than the cross-sectional rates might suggest.

Seen this way, the untapped pool of volunteers for the Big Society is actually rather small. As many as 87% of British adults have volunteered at least once between 1991 and 2007 while only 13% have never been active in any voluntary association in this period. Following the Li et al. (2002) argument people who have volunteered at least once are still not averse to participations and therefore should be counted as part of the Big Society, even if they do not volunteer at a certain point in time. These findings show that the vast majority of British adults are already involved in social networks through voluntary associations, indicating a high level volume of social capital in Britain and a smaller untapped pool of volunteers than usually assumed.

In order to classify this diversity of volunteering patterns for further analysis, the number of volunteering occasions between 1991 and 2007 was calculated. The number of occasions varied between none and nine; 'never volunteering' and 'volunteering in all nine occasions' were the most common patterns. The analysis of the number of volunteering and non-volunteering occasions also suggests that between 1991 and 2007 participants were slightly more likely to be volunteering than non-volunteering: they reported volunteering on average on five occasions (SE=0.02) but non-volunteering on four occasions (SE=0.05).

Using the number of volunteering occasions, all participants were classified into five groups of theoretical and practical interest<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 3). The first group (13%) included non-volunteers or ‘abstainers’; in other words, individuals who did not volunteer at all between 1997 and 2007. This group is of theoretical and practical interest because they are the individuals who represent the real untapped pool for new volunteers. The second group were ‘on-offs’ (9%). In comparison to the previous group, on-offs have been involved once but not again, so although they are not averse to volunteering, they do not continue doing it. The third group - ‘transitory volunteers’ (19%) - included people who have volunteered on two or three occasions. The fourth group were ‘intermediary volunteers’ (28%) who volunteered on four to six occasions. Finally, the fifth group were ‘committed volunteers’ who have reported volunteering on seven, eight or nine occasions (32%). This group constitutes individuals who are probably the most networked in society and of least concern to policymakers.

[Figure 3 here]

### **Contrasting cross-sectional and longitudinal volunteering measures**

Contrasting cross-sectional and longitudinal measures of volunteering in Figure 4 highlights the differences between looking at those who are volunteering at a moment in time (as in Figure 1) with all volunteering histories over a period of time (as in Figure 2). This comparison suggests that cross-sectional measures of volunteering tend to underestimate the number of individuals who in general are volunteers by including in the ‘non-volunteer’ category at a certain point in time people who have varied histories of volunteering, not only those who have never volunteered.

[Figure 4 here]

Figure 4 reveals that in 2007<sup>3</sup>, there was a high proportion of people who could be considered as volunteers - or at least as potential volunteers - despite not being classified as



such in a particular year. Among the 54% of adults who did not report volunteering in 2007, only 23% had actually never volunteered between 1991 and 2007, i.e. they were correctly classified as non-volunteers in 2007. However, the rest - three quarters - of year 2007's 'non-volunteers' had volunteered at least once between 1991 and 2007, and of these only 14% had volunteered just the once. While it was accurately reported that they did not volunteer in 2007, in reality more than half of 2007's 'non-volunteers' had considerable volunteering experience, with most of them volunteering several times.

Similarly, as can be seen in Figure 4, a cross-sectional measure of volunteering in 2007 produced a 46% volunteering rate, but this 46% was made up of people with quite different histories of volunteering. More than half (60%) were committed volunteers and slightly less than one third (29%) intermediary volunteers. This rate however also included 2% of those who volunteered just once.

### **Socio-economic differences across different volunteering types**

As mentioned earlier, the traditional static approach attributes differences in the volunteering rates between various socio-economic groups in society to a lower likelihood of joining. For example, if younger people are less likely to volunteer at a certain point in time, the most commonly used explanation for this is that they are less likely to join voluntary associations. The longitudinal analysis of individual histories of volunteering helps assess whether this assumption is true. To do that, several regression analyses were conducted and the results are presented in Table 1. These analyses examined how the likelihood of volunteering in 2007 and the likelihood of having a certain longitudinal volunteering history type vary depending on several socio-economic characteristics: the year of birth, gender, personal income per year in 2007 and the social class of the individual in 2007

[Table 1 here]

As can be seen in the second column of Table 1, older people, people with a higher income per year and individuals from the service class were significantly more likely to report volunteering in 2007 than younger people, people with lower income or semi and unskilled manual workers, when other variables in the model are taken into account. Belonging to the service class had the strongest relationship to volunteering in 2007. Individuals from the service class were 1.5 times more likely to volunteer than individuals in semi- and unskilled occupations. The effects of the birth year (age) and personal income, albeit significant, were much weaker. For a one year increase in birth year, the odds of volunteering decreased 1.01 times. Similarly each additional thousand pounds of personal income a year increased the likelihood of volunteering 1.01 times.

Were these differences in cross-sectional volunteering rates significant because younger, poorer and semi-unskilled individuals were more passive and less likely to become involved in voluntary associations, or – in other words – because more of them never volunteer? The results suggest that this assumption was true only in regard to the differences in volunteering between service class and semi-unskilled individuals. Indeed, service class individuals were approximately 2.4 times more likely to have never volunteered between 1991 and 2007 than individuals in semi and unskilled occupations.

However other differences in the longitudinal processes of volunteering contribute to the class differences in volunteering rates too. Service class individuals were not only more likely to join voluntary associations at least once, but also were 2.6 times more likely to be committed to volunteering than semi- and unskilled individuals. Moreover, if we accept a lower significance level, individuals in service occupations were 1.7 times more likely to volunteer just once. So volunteering among unskilled/skilled individuals was less common not only because they were less likely to join but also because they were more likely to volunteer just once - and so be less likely to be committed volunteers than service class

individuals. This indicates that to increase levels of volunteering among semi- and unskilled individuals, 'encouragement' might not be enough. There is also a need for policy strategies focussed on retention.

The cross-sectional differences in volunteering between different groups are not always explained by a certain group being more passive and uninvolved. For example, as can be seen in Table 1, younger people were less likely to volunteer in 2007 than older people (each year younger making them 1.01 times less likely to volunteer). However, this difference was not because younger people were less likely to be volunteers in general (the year of birth was not a significant predictor of never volunteering) but because the volunteering dynamic of younger people over time is different from older people. Table 1 indicates that younger people were significantly more likely to be intermediary and less likely to be committed volunteers. So they do join and have a similar number of volunteering episodes as older people. However, they are more likely to join, stay for while then leave – and come back later. Consequently at any point in time the likelihood of a younger person volunteering is slightly lower than that of an older individual. But, as can be seen in Table 1, over a longer period of time young people volunteer as many times as older people do.

Table 1 also reveals that while there might not be apparent cross-sectional differences in volunteering between some socio-economic groups, they still can differ in their volunteering dynamics. While there were no significant gender differences in volunteering between men and women in 2007, women were 1.4 times more likely than men to be intermediary volunteers and 1.3 times less likely to be committed volunteers. However - importantly - over a longer period of time the total number of occasions of volunteering did not differ between men and women. While on the surface there were no significant cross-sectional differences in volunteering between men and women, both genders have different longitudinal volunteering patterns. Similarly while there were not significant differences in

volunteering in 2007 between intermediate class and semi-unskilled workers, the latter were significantly more likely never to join an association and also less likely to be committed volunteers. These differences in the dynamics of volunteering were significant when considering volunteer activity over time from a social class perspective: the intermediate class individuals had volunteered on average on two more occasions than semi- and unskilled workers.

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

This paper contrasted two differing approaches to the measurement of volunteering; the static approach and the dynamic approach. The aim was to highlight the advantages of using the dynamic approach over the static when measuring volunteering, and consequently exploring the measurement of social capital and testing assumptions relating to the size of the volunteer pool available for the Big Society in Great Britain.

Based on the life course approach this paper argued that volunteering is a complex and dynamic process and that many individuals repeatedly move into and out of voluntary associations. Consequently to have a richer picture of volunteering behaviour and to be able to estimate more accurately the extent of volunteering, social capital and the size of the Big Society, individual longitudinal patterns should be examined. The results support all three hypotheses that were proposed in this study.

An important finding from this study is that the static approach oversimplifies volunteering behaviour by dividing individuals into volunteers and non-volunteers. This study clearly showed that volunteering is a much more complex and dynamic process than the static approach shows. The dynamic findings show that individuals repeatedly move into and out of voluntary associations and that only one quarter of the population could be categorised as 'volunteers' or 'non-volunteers' throughout the period from 1991 to 2007.

Thus this finding provides further support to the dynamic model of voluntary affiliation proposed by McPherson (1981).

On the surface this finding might seem to support the argument that ‘long-term commitment to organizations might belong to the past’ (Wollebaek & Stolle, 2003, p.176) as involvement in voluntary associations has become sporadic, non-committed and self-centred (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Safrit & Merrill, 2002; Wuthnow, 1998). As the results of this study indicate, although individuals do move into and out of volunteering repeatedly, in general the vast majority do return to volunteering, so they are committed to volunteering as an activity. However there is still a need to examine the dynamics of involvement and levels of commitment to one particular organisation: the concept of ‘volunteer loyalty’.

Another significant finding is that cross-sectional rates of volunteering tend to overestimate levels of non-involvement and underestimate involvement in voluntary associations. Although only half the adult population in Britain volunteers at any particular point in time, very few people – roughly one in ten - have never ever volunteered at all. On the contrary: the vast majority of British adults volunteered at least once between 1991 and 2007 and most of them volunteer repeatedly. Even if they are not involved at a particular point in time because they tend to volunteer intermittently, these adults are not averse to participation and therefore are already part of the Big Society.

In this respect, the results of this study do not support the previous research (e.g. Halpern, 2005; Pattie & Johnston, 2011) or the assumptions of Big Society agenda strategists expressing concerns about low levels of volunteering in Great Britain. This study suggests that instead the vast majority of available adults are already volunteering in one form or another, at one time or another, and that the untapped pool of volunteering for the Big Society is rather small.

This study also makes an important contribution by demonstrating that low cross-sectional rates of volunteering are not always the result of individuals from certain socio-economic groups being passive and abstaining from involvement in voluntary associations. This study found that if some groups in society - like for example younger people or semi- and unskilled workers - have lower cross-sectional rates of involvement in voluntary associations then it does not necessarily mean they are less likely to become involved. It does not necessarily follow therefore that the only way to increase their participation is to encourage them to volunteer.

Other aspects of the volunteering dynamics of these groups can contribute to their low involvement too. For example, this study reveals that semi- and unskilled workers have lower rates of volunteering than service class individuals. Analysis of their volunteering histories show this is because they are significantly less likely to join voluntary associations but also less likely to be committed than service class individuals. This finding is consistent with McPherson (1981) who found that membership rates in voluntary associations among working class individuals in the USA were lower because they are less likely to become involved and more likely to stop their membership than middle class individuals. Establishing the reasons for these class differences was beyond the scope of this study but a possible explanation might lie in the differences in how life changes affect individuals from different social classes. It might be that semi- and unskilled workers are more likely than service class individuals to stop volunteering, because any life changes have a more profound effect on the first than the latter because service class individuals usually have more resources (such as money, social support and skills) to cope with these changes. For example, service class individuals might continue their volunteering after the birth of a child because they can afford childcare. For semi or unskilled households a baby might mean the volunteering has to stop, at least for a while, because they cannot afford to pay somebody to look after their child

while they are out working for nothing. On the other hand, there might be organisational factors that discourage semi-or unskilled individuals from continuing to volunteer. For example, voluntary associations might make more effort to retain service class individuals as they have more skills and other resources than semi- or unskilled workers.

This study also found that sometimes the differences in cross-sectional volunteering rates are not because one group is less likely to become involved. For example, younger people have lower cross-sectional rates of volunteering because they are more likely to volunteer intermittently. They are also less likely to be committed volunteers than older individuals. This is not surprising as younger people tend to move house, change jobs and experience other changes more often.

To some extent the findings of this study must be interpreted with caution because the responses to the question inquiring about a person's activity in voluntary associations do not specify the actual time devoted to volunteering. Individuals who answered that they do join in the activities of voluntary organisations on a regular basis might be volunteering once a week or once a month. The BHPS does not provide an opportunity to measure the extent of volunteering in more detail. However the data from the Citizenship Survey in Britain (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010) indicate that approximately 25% of adults volunteer at least once a month. Future studies using time-use surveys might cast a better light on how many hours individuals actually do volunteer.

Another limitation is that from 1995 the question regarding activity in voluntary organizations was asked only bi-annually, so it is not possible to establish a complete picture of volunteering. Prospective data measuring individual volunteering every month for ten or twenty years would have been more suited to this study but are not available. While such data would increase accuracy, this study still makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the longitudinal dynamics of volunteering.

The findings from this study have important implications both for volunteering research and the development of volunteering policies. The results indicate there is a need for more research into the retention of volunteers, focusing on individual and organisational factors that determine whether an individual continues to volunteer, or stops.

An important policy implication from this paper is that there is a greater level of volunteering and social capital in Great Britain than the Big Society agenda assumes. This paper finds the untapped pool of volunteers for the Big Society in Britain much smaller than previously thought, as most adults are already volunteering. There is a section in society of non-volunteers who could be recruited but its size is much smaller than previously assumed. So the emphasis for future policy efforts to raise volunteer numbers for the Big Society should be on how to retain the existing volunteer force and how to encourage former volunteers to re-engage.



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## Notes

1. While readers might already be familiar with descriptive and logistic, multiple and random coefficient regression analysis methods, the sequence analysis (also called optimal matching), which originates from natural sciences is still rarely used in social sciences and therefore might need a brief introduction. The sequence analysis is a data analysis method that allows analyzing ordered lists of elements (sequences) without reducing them to a single event (Abbott & Tsay, 2000; Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010). Using the sequence analysis, the history of activity for each individual is expressed as a sequence- a list of ordered elements, in this case -volunteering status. Each element has a numerical value: non-activity is coded as 0 but activity as 1. The positions of elements are fixed and ordered by time.
2. The author of this paper attempted to use statistical approach to the classification employing optimal matching techniques. However, the outcome was ten different volunteering history types that differed only on the number of occasions one has been active. As ten groups were too large number for further analysis, the author decided to group individuals according to their volunteering histories into groups of theoretical interest.
3. The end-point of the panel was chosen for the comparison. The analysis was also conducted for all other measurement occasions and the results obtained were largely similar despite the cross-sectional volunteering rates changed slightly through the panel.

**Table 1. Socio-economic Characteristics and Volunteering (N=3,983)**

	<b>Volunteering outcomes</b>						
	<b>Active in 2007</b>	<b>Nr of volunteering episodes between 1991 and 2007</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Once</b>	<b>Transitory</b>	<b>Intermediary</b>	<b>Committed</b>
	<i>b</i> (SE) <i>sign</i>	<i>b</i> (SE) <i>sign</i>	<i>b</i> (SE) <i>sign</i>	<i>b</i> (SE) <i>sign</i>	<i>b</i> (SE) <i>sign</i>	<i>b</i> (SE) <i>sign</i>	<i>b</i> (SE) <i>sign</i>
<b>Year of birth</b>	<b>- 0.01</b> (0.01)* *	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	<b>0.03</b> (0.01)***	<b>-0.03</b> (0.01)***
<b>Gender (0=man)</b>	-0.07 (0.11)	-0.10 (0.21)	0.10 (0.21)	-0.12 (0.19)	-0.15 (0.14)	<b>0.33</b> (0.12)**	<b>-0.26</b> (0.12)**
<b>Income per year in 2007</b>	<b>0.01</b> (0.01)* *	0.02 (0.01)*	-0.02 (0.01)*	0.01 (0.01)	<b>-0.01</b> (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)*
<b>Social class in 2007 (0=semi/unskilled manual workers)</b>							
<b>Skilled manual workers</b>	-0.30 (0.25)	0.59 (0.43)	-0.59 (0.43)	0.67 (0.36)*	0.51 (0.28)*	-0.48 (0.30)	-0.12 (0.30)
<b>Foreman, technicians</b>	0.22 (0.24)	0.08 (0.34)	-0.08 (0.34)	-0.75 (0.43)*	0.10 (0.28)	0.06 (0.26)	0.26 (0.29)
<b>Petty bourgeoisie</b>	0.18 (0.22)	0.56 (0.38)	-0.56 (0.38)	-0.06 (0.34)	-0.27 (0.26)	0.12 (0.23)	0.45 (0.25)*
<b>Intermediate</b>	0.23 (0.18)	<b>0.79</b> (0.29)**	<b>-0.79</b> (0.29)**	0.24 (0.27)	0.10 (0.21)	-0.23 (0.19)	<b>0.45</b> (0.21)**
<b>Service class</b>	<b>0.42</b> (0.16)* *	<b>0.86</b> (0.29)***	<b>-0.86</b> (0.29)***	-0.51 (0.27)*	-0.25 (0.20)	-0.12 (0.17)	<b>0.97</b> (0.19)***
<b>Constant</b>	25.46 (10.28) **	-23.83 (19.07)	23.83 (19.07)	0.05 (16.84)	-15.68 (13.01)	-56.20 (11.11)** *	55.25 (11.26)***

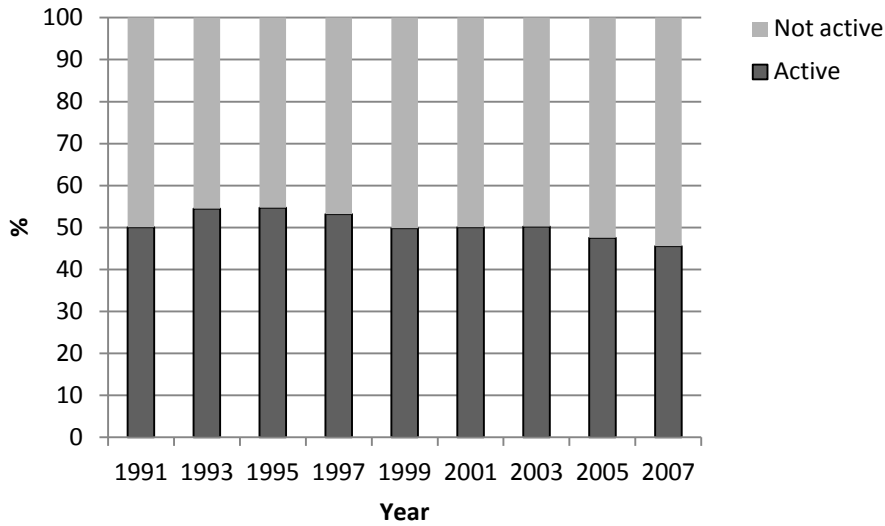
\*\*\*p<0.001

\*\*0.01<p<=0.05

\*0.05<p<=0.10

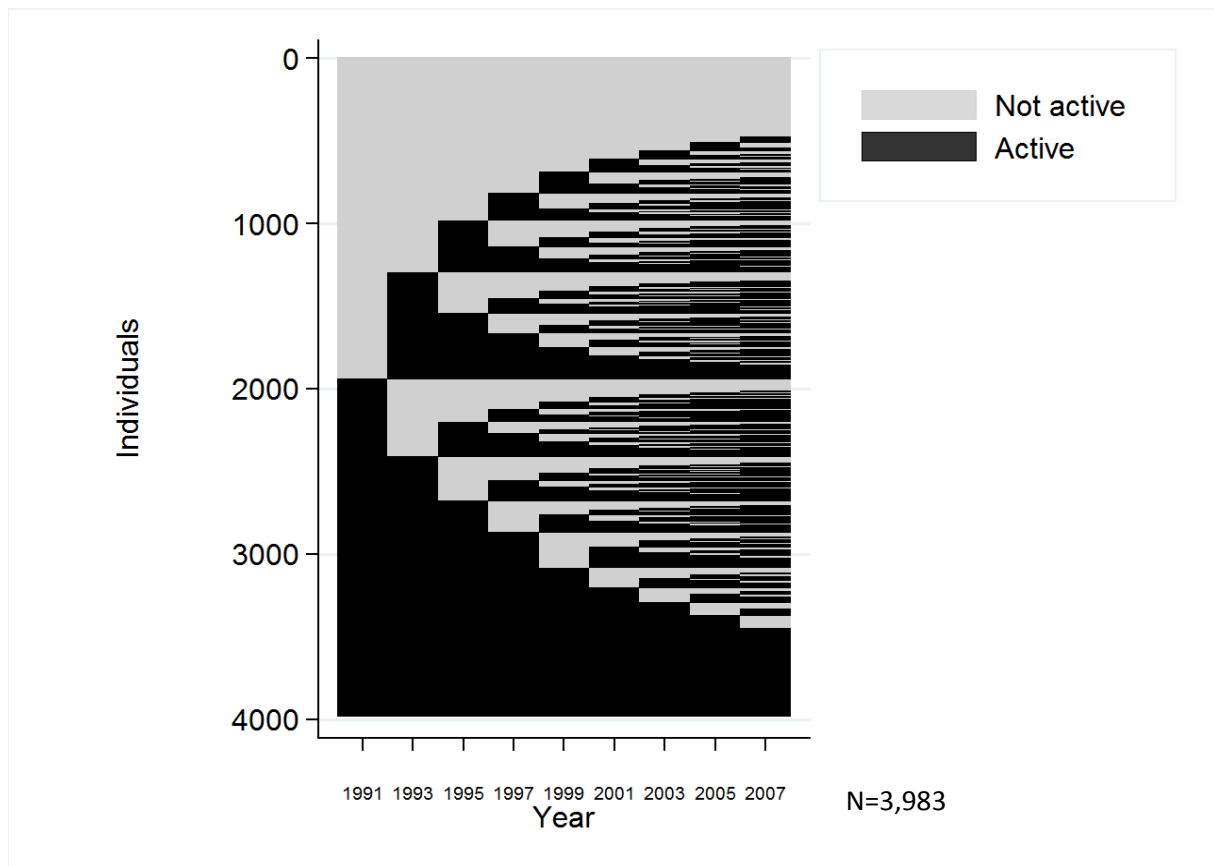
**Note.** For logistic regression analyses, the variable of the longitudinal type of volunteering was re-coded into five separate binary variables and thus logistic regression analyses estimated the probability of an individual having a certain type of longitudinal patterns (e.g. never) as opposite of having any of other four types.

**Figure 1. Cross-sectional rates of activity in voluntary associations (1991-2007)**



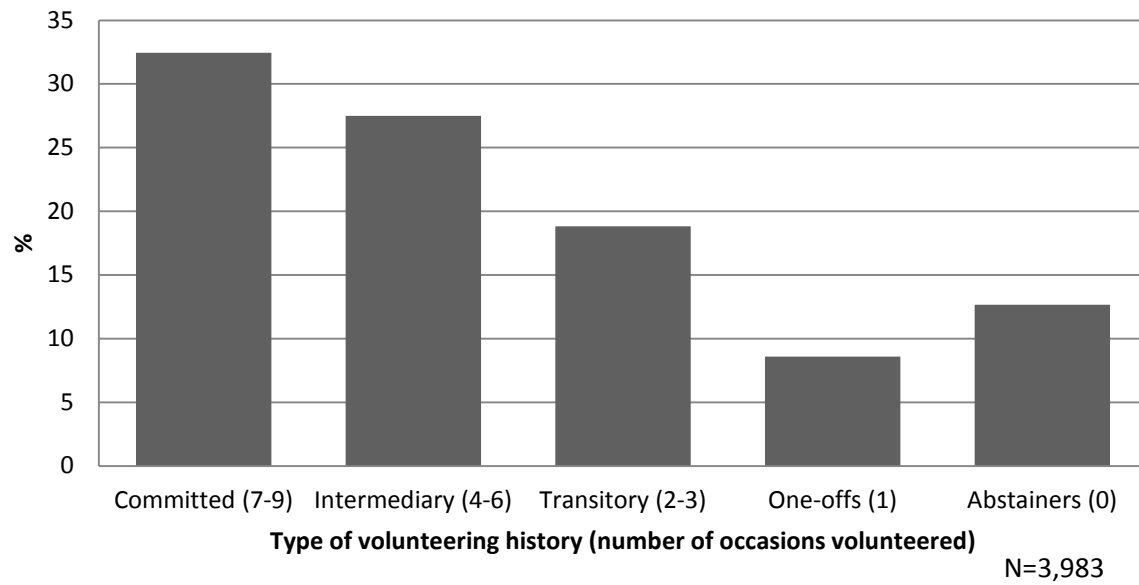
N=3,983

**Figure 2. Individual histories of activity in voluntary association 1991- 2007**





**Figure 3. Types of volunteering histories 1991-2007**



**Figure 4. Comparison of cross-sectional and longitudinal types of volunteers**

**in 2007**

