

The volunteer journey: people moving into and out of volunteering over their life course

Nick Ockenden and Jennifer Russell
The Institute for Volunteering Research

6th September 2010

NCVO / VSSN Researching the Voluntary Sector Conference, Leeds

Introduction

This paper explores people's routes into and out of volunteering within the context of the 'volunteer journey', by which people participate in volunteering dynamically in an environment which changes over space, place and time. While much is known about why people start volunteering and the reasons they give for leaving, comparatively little is understood about how someone's volunteering motivations, practices and preferences change over their life course.

In the context of stagnating rates of volunteering (DCLG, 2010), volunteer-involving organisations will need to develop an ever more nuanced understanding of why and how people choose to get involved. It is hoped that exploring an individual's experience of volunteering as a journey over their life course will help develop such an understanding. This paper is based on research and thinking undertaken by the Institute for Volunteering Research over the past thirteen years alongside wider research on volunteering.

The 'volunteer journey' concept was developed by the Commission on the Future of Volunteering. The Commission was, however, focused on making practical recommendations and was not in a position to be able to fully develop the concept. Little has therefore been done to advance our understanding of the 'volunteer journey' or to consider how it might help to develop our appreciation of an individual's movement into and out of volunteering.

Routes into and out of volunteering

Research has provided much information on people's reasons for starting and stopping volunteering. Altruistic reasons tend to dominate people's explanations for getting involved, including *'wanting to improve things, help people'* (53 per cent) as well as *'the cause was important to me'* (41 per cent). When asked why they stopped volunteering, practical reasons often feature more heavily, including having less time due to changing home or work circumstances (40 per cent), volunteering losing its relevance (five per cent) and health problems / old age (14 per cent) (Low et al, 2007). Similarly, in a study of Red Cross volunteers in Flanders, Hustinx (2010) notes that reasons to quit were 'all about the common and human parts of life' (p.250).

Motivations to volunteer can also vary and change over time. Younger people tend to be more focused improving their employment prospects compared with older individuals who are more likely to volunteer due to having spare time or for social reasons (Low et al, 2007). Motivation can also change

during a single volunteer experience. Initial motivations may not always be fulfilled, with people choosing to leave if they are not met or stay as a result of additional positive impacts (see Russell, 2009 for a wide range of unexpected benefits in relation to environmental volunteering).

Research has also explored volunteering at different stages during people's lives; rates of volunteering vary according to a variety of different demographic factors, or 'predispositions'. Changes can be seen as people move through different stages in the life-cycle (Selbee and Reed, 2001) and certain 'stages' tend to demonstrate higher occurrences of volunteering, such as ages between 34 – 44 and 55 – 64 (Low et al, 2007).

Our understanding of an individual's 'journey' through volunteering may be limited by the dominance of large scale quantitative surveys which tend to homogenise the experiences of individuals. In reality, however, people's journeys over their life time are diverse and individual (Brodie et al, 2009) as well as unpredictable (Hustinx, 2010). Moreover, such surveys tend to present a snapshot in time which limits their ability to explore how motivations, experiences or external factors change over time. In relation to the reasons that people stop volunteering, Hustinx (2010) calls for 'an everyday monitoring of the life course as a situated, multiple, and dynamic activity' (p.251). Evidence is, however, available, albeit on a limited scale. Rotolo (2000) presents one of the few studies which adopts a more dynamic approach to data collection and analysis, having explored the 'event histories' of more than 1,000 individuals in relation to their affiliation with voluntary associations. More recently, the Pathways through Participation project is seeking to explore people's experiences of participation by employing life history interviewing techniques (see www.pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk).

The constituents of the volunteer journey

The volunteer journey is made up of three separate components: the individual; the wider environment; and external triggers.

The individual

There is some research which has explored the part played by an individual's personality in their decision to volunteer or not. This includes debates around whether people can be inherently selfish or altruistic. Research has connected agreeableness and extraversion to volunteering, as well as the presence of pro-social values (Carlo et al, 2004). Similarly, Begley (2009) quotes research by Mikulincer who found that people with an enhanced sense of trust and security demonstrated an increased likelihood to volunteer.

The wider environment

Government can act as an enabler or barrier to participation, through directly funding opportunities, for example. Underlying political ideologies can also make an important contribution. At one extreme, the increased political emphasis on public participation throughout the 1960s led to a 'golden age' of community work (see Brodie et al 2009), while it has also been argued that the present day focus on consumer capitalism has led to people permanently

feeling that they lack commodities or money, leading to them feeling that they don't have time to give (Begley, 2009).

The community from which an individual is drawn or in which they grew up can have a powerful influence over their volunteering choices. It can affect what is expected of you; with much faith-based membership, for example, involving a commitment to volunteer as part of an individual's beliefs (Lukka and Locke, 2003). Similarly, cultural understandings of volunteering differ between communities, with some Asian and African societies lacking a word for volunteering and interpreting it more as an everyday activity of 'helping out' (Bhasin, 1997). The community is also important geographically and can affect the type of volunteering that takes place. It has been argued, for example, that geographically deprived communities and the northern counties of England engage more in informal forms of helping whereas southern areas including London and more affluent communities have a higher proportion of more formalised volunteering (Williams, 2003).

Triggers

Certain 'triggers' may act to push someone into volunteering, or move them away from it. They have the capacity to function in different ways, dependent on the wider environmental context. They can be active (i.e. they immediately trigger someone to start or stop volunteering), dormant (i.e. they activate a delayed response which may be acted upon in the future), or defunct (i.e. the trigger will never lead to any action).

Triggers are often external factors. This may be as simple as someone being asked to volunteer, but it could also be a sudden or unexpected experience. Research by IVR found that many people who volunteered as prison visitors had started because a friend or family member had been in prison, while offenders who volunteered as peer advisors often did so because they had been recipients of the service when they first entered prison (NOMS, 2007). This concept is discussed by Rotolo (2000) who states that the act of being involved in a voluntary association is an important life stage in itself and can influence other forms of voluntary involvement.

Triggers can also be closely related to life events, building on understandings of people's predispositions to volunteer. The high levels of volunteering observed between ages 34 and 44 years represent a time of life when many people are likely to have younger children. Wider research has found that having children (over the age of five) increases the chance of volunteering (Selbee and Reed, 2001). Similarly, Rotolo (2000) identified that the presence of pre-school children in families meant that parents (especially mothers) stayed affiliated to youth groups for longer periods of time as a result of their children being members of the groups. Rates of volunteering are also high amongst those aged 55 – 64. This group is made up of high numbers of newly retired individuals, who are frequently healthy, active and have a newfound amount of available time. Indeed, Mutchler et al (2003) found that for those who had not previously participated in volunteering, reducing their participation in the paid workforce or leaving it altogether was associated with an increase in formal volunteer activity. Conversely, certain life stages may

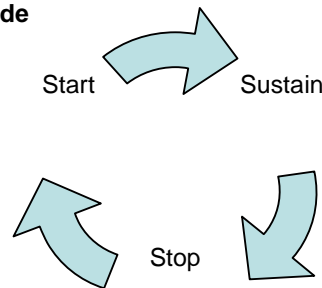
restrict an individual's ability to get involved. Research by Nesbitt (2010) explored a variety of life events on people's decision to volunteer and found that having a child was correlated with a decrease in the frequency of volunteering and of the hours contributed.

Triggers can, however, risk homogenising the experiences of individuals, particularly with regard to life events. While certain generalisations can be made, no two people's progression through life will be the same. Perhaps this is why Nesbitt (2010) found such a high degree of unpredictability amongst the life events she tested against people's rates of volunteering.

Developing the concept of the volunteer journey

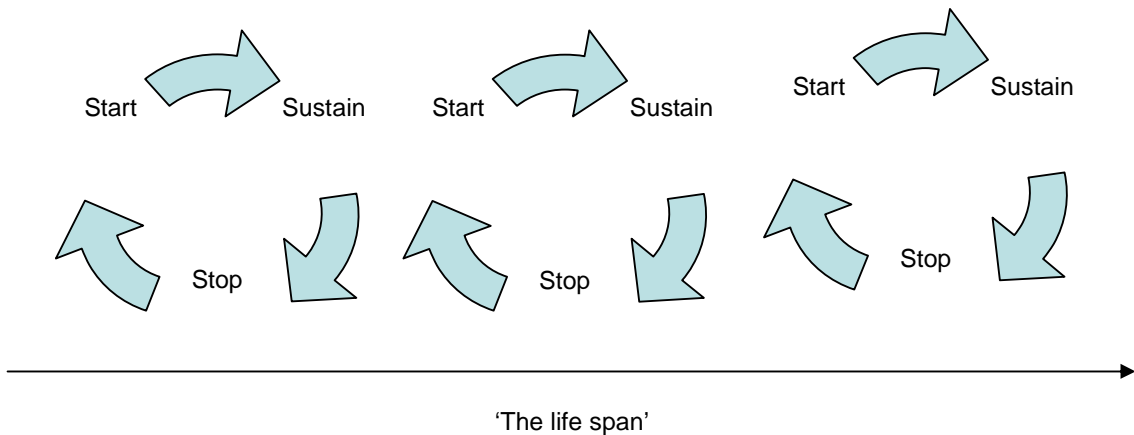
When an individual starts volunteering they enter a 'volunteering episode' which consists of an individual starting to volunteer, sustaining their involvement for a period of time and then ending their volunteering. One 'episode' describes a single experience of volunteering with a particular activity. This concept builds on research around the 'life cycle' of a volunteer. Beugen (1985) describes a life cycle consisting of three stages: exploratory; developmental; and mature. Similarly, Bussell and Forbes' (2003) also describe three stages: the determinants; the decision to volunteer; and the activity itself. They go on to say that the volunteer can leave at any stage of the life cycle, which also applies to the volunteering episode.

Figure 1. A volunteering episode



A volunteering episode differs from the volunteer life cycle concept by focusing on its presence in relation to the rest of the volunteer's life course. Someone may, for example, experience multiple different episodes throughout their life. They do not necessarily occur in a linear manner, and may be a mixture of connected and independent experiences. Furthermore, episodes may overlap or occur at the same time – indeed, more than one-third of volunteers (36 per cent) give their time to at least three organisations (Low et al, 2007). Such episodes can be extremely brief and repeated at frequent or irregular intervals, in the case of episodic volunteering or micro-episodic volunteering. Conversely, they may be very lengthy in cases where an individual spends the majority of their life undertaking a single form of volunteering.

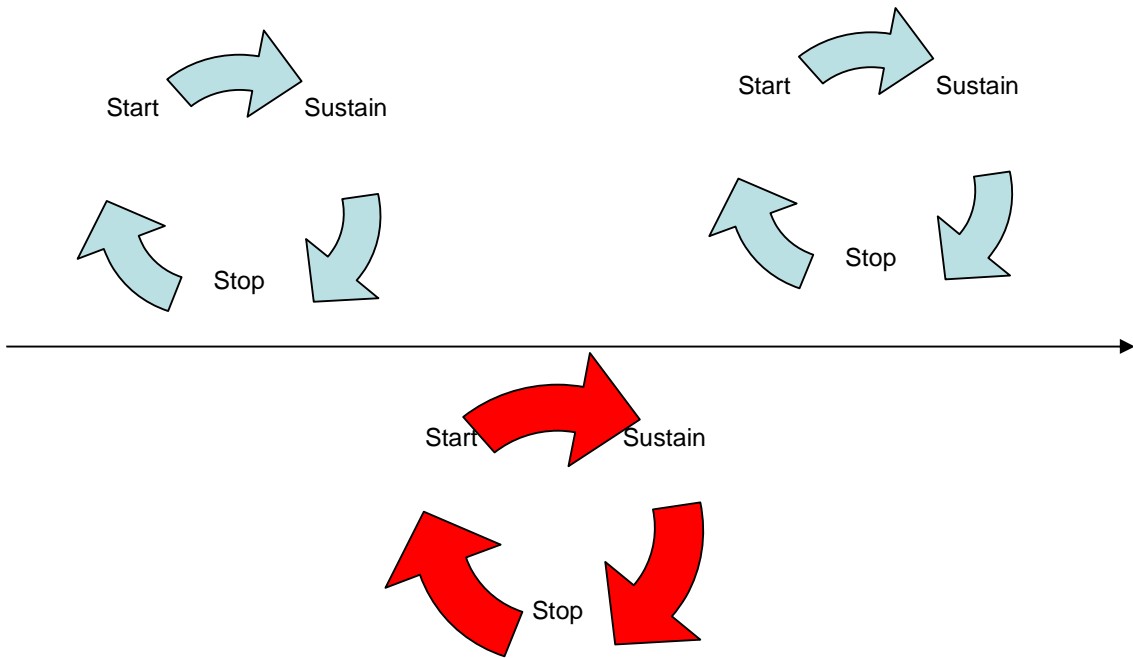
Figure 2. Multiple and successive volunteering episodes over the life span



A rare contribution to the knowledge base around the length of time people participate in groups is presented by Rotolo (2000). He reports that younger people tend to demonstrate a higher turnover of voluntary association affiliation, joining and leaving groups readily. Older people on the other hand tend to join fewer associations but the length of their involvement – or their volunteering episode – increases. Similarly, Hustinx (2010) describes volunteers who exhibit ‘frequent entries and withdrawals’ (p.238).

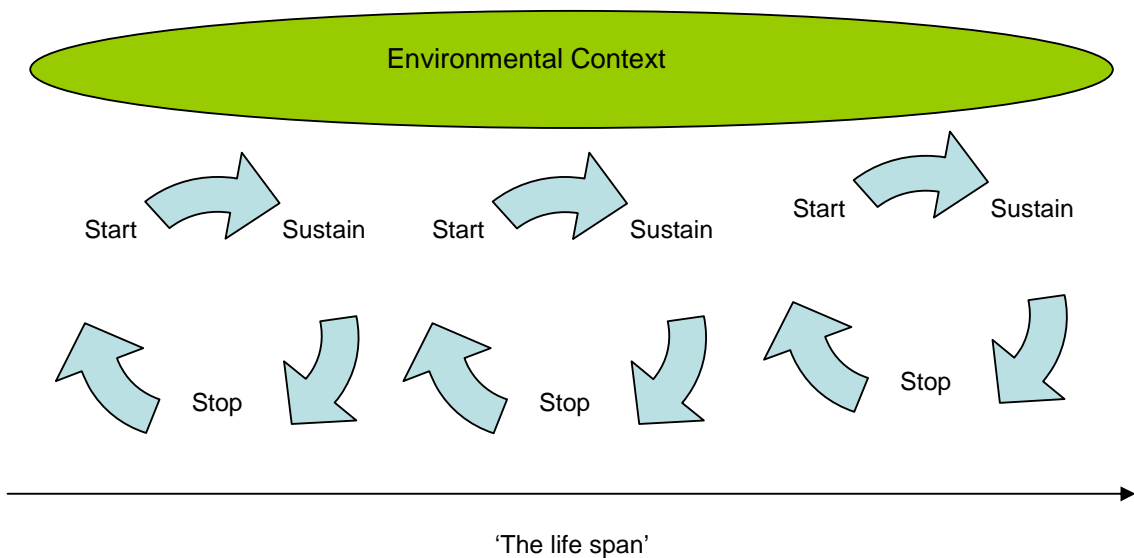
The volunteering episode also builds on our understanding of what might happen when people stop volunteering. Rather than simply seeing them as ‘non volunteers’, they may enter a similar episode, but of non volunteering, ready to re-engage later. These non volunteering episodes function in a reverse of the volunteering episode. The factor that initiates them is the same factor that ends a volunteering episode. The factor that sustains them is likely to be something associated with the external environment or a life event. And the factor that causes them to end could be that which triggers a volunteering episode. During a non volunteering episode the volunteer may continue to be engaged with the volunteering (or the cause), but on a dormant level. This concept is illustrated below.

Figure 3. A non volunteering episode surrounded by volunteering episodes



The wider environmental context – an individual's employment, family, friends, local community – is a consistent factor in shaping volunteering episodes, including whether it is a single sustained episode or a series of smaller, individual ones.

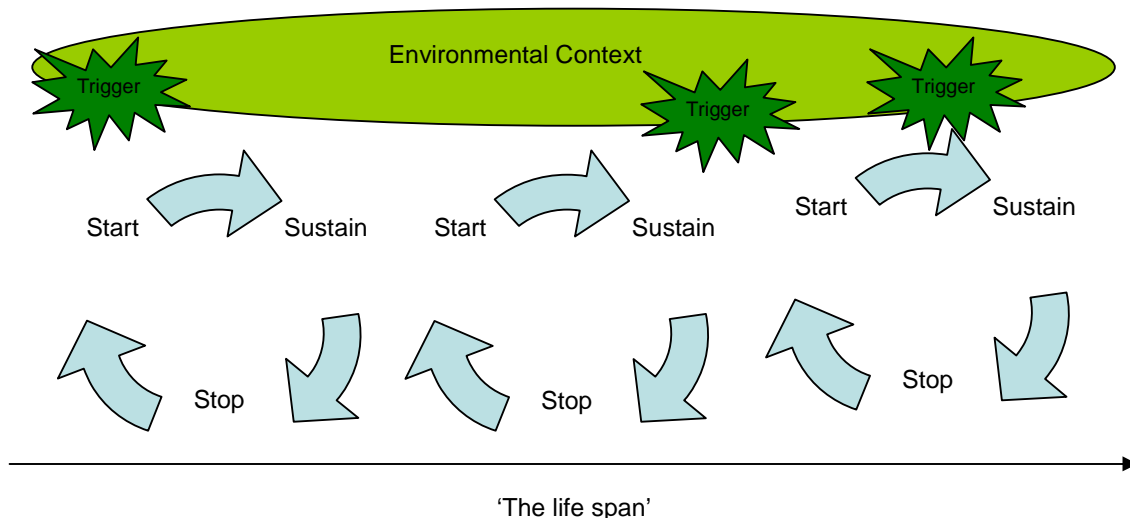
Figure 4: The effect of the wider environmental context



Triggers can occur at any stage of the life span and at any stage of a volunteering episode, acting to either push someone towards a volunteering episode or to move them away. They exist within the wider environmental context, which can create, sustain or prevent the activation of a trigger. A

trigger, for example, may spark a desire to volunteer (e.g. a local park being threatened by development) which may not be acted upon until the wider context of an individual's life permits it (e.g. a newborn baby growing up). Building on Rotolo's (2000) understanding that volunteering experiences themselves can be an important influence in their own right, triggers may also be affected by individual volunteering episodes; the extent to which they view their experience positively.

Figure 5: Triggers in the volunteer journey



Initial conclusions

Rather than viewing the experience and opinions of a volunteer in isolation from space, place and time, much can be learnt by viewing their participation in its widest possible context. An individual's journey is dynamic and changes in response to their wider environment, life experiences, view and opinions. An individual may experience episodes of volunteering followed by episodes of non volunteering, but until we look at their life histories this will be difficult to understand. Someone may engage in several different volunteering activities which may or may not overlap in time, leading to multiple experiences and multiple episodes of volunteering, but until we ask about this it will be hard to appreciate how their current volunteering is affected by other activities. And a person may have strong preconceptions about the type of volunteering they want to do or feel is important, but unless we learn more about the community and culture they have grown up and lived within it will be difficult to determine why they may value certain activities over and above others.

If we are to develop our understanding of why and how someone moves into and out of volunteering, it is necessary to view their involvement in relation to their wider environment and their lifespan. Starting from the position of the volunteer themselves will greatly increase our knowledge base. If volunteer-involving organisation can learn more about why someone is volunteering with them in the way in which they are, there is scope to create an even more fulfilling relationship between the volunteer and the organisation.

References

Begley, S. (2009) 'Adventures in good and evil. What makes some of us saints and some of us sinners? The evolutionary roots of morality' *Newsweek* 25.09.09

Beugen, P. (1985) 'Supporting the volunteer life-cycle' in *Voluntary Action Leadership*, Fall, p.17-19

Bhasin, S. (1997) *My time, my community, myself: experiences of volunteering within the Black community* The National Centre for Volunteering: London

Brodie, E., Cowling, E., and Nissen.,N. (2009) *Understanding participation: A literature review* NCVO, IVR and INVOLVE: London

DCLG (2010) *2008-09 Citizenship Survey. Volunteering and Charitable Giving Topic Report*, London: Department for Communities and Local Government: London

Hustinx, L. (2008). 'I Quit, Therefore I Am? Volunteer Turnover and the Politics of Self-Actualization' *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*

Low, N., Butt, S., Ellis Paine, A. and Davis Smith, J. (2007) *Helping Out: A national study of volunteering and charitable giving*, Cabinet Office: London

Lukka, P. and Locke, M. with A. Soteri-Procter (2003) *Faith and voluntary action: communities, values and resources* Volunteering England: London

Musick, M. and Wilson, J. (2008) *Volunteers: a social profile* Indiana University Press

Mutchler, J., Burr, J. and Caro, F. (2003) 'From paid work to volunteer: leaving the paid workforce and volunteering in later life', *Social Forces* 81 p.1267-1293

Rotolo, T. (2000) 'A time to join, a time to quit: the influence of life cycle transitions on voluntary association memberships', *Social Forces*, 78 (3), p.1133-1161

Russell, J. (2009) '*Making volunteering easier*'. *The story of environmental volunteering in South West England* IVR: London

Selbee, L.K, and Reed, P.B. (2001) 'Patterns of volunteering over the life cycle', *Canadian Social Trends*, 61 p. 2-4

Williams, C. (2003) 'Developing community involvement: contrasting local and regional participatory cultures in Britain and their implications for policy' in *Regional Studies: the Journal of the Regional Studies Association*, 37 (5) p.531-541