The Demographic Opportunity: volunteering in older age

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Across advanced capitalist economies, demographic change has lead to older adults constituting a large and growing proportion of the population. This demographic shift is often observed in purely negative terms, focussing on the economic burden of a larger cohort of older people (in terms of pensions, health costs etc). This fails to take into account that this demographic change is the result of large numbers of individuals living longer, well beyond state pension age, potentially presenting the opportunity to continuing enjoying active lifestyles. Katz and Monk (1993) suggest that this has contributed to a paradigm shift in the way in which we understand ageing; no longer are individuals assumed to be at a stage in a chronologically-determined 'life cycle', rather it is suggested that an individual's 'life course' is open to unexpected turns and changes, and may be wholly unrelated to their chronological age. This paper is interested in how these changes can contribute to an understanding of how older adults come to be undertaking voluntary work, through adopting a life course perspective in order to examine pathways into volunteering. This is done by situating voluntary and community activity within other activities undertaken across the lifecourse, to look at how adults come to be volunteering in older age.

Introduction

This paper adopts a lifecourse perspective to understand the unpaid voluntary and community work undertaken by adults in older age. Both unpaid voluntary activity and older age have many different, and contested, meanings. The latter is explored further in the next section, while the former is taken her to be any activity which is unpaid, done of an individual's own free will and helps those beyond their immediate family (Williams, 2003). Older age volunteering is situated within other work activities – paid an unpaid, public and private – that individuals have undertaken across their lifecourse. A lifecourse perspective is applied to voluntary and community activity, arguing that one cannot understand the voluntary and community activity that individuals undertake in older age without understanding how this relates to previous voluntary and community activity and to paid work and domestic roles. In doing so, it seeks to critique the Big Society assumption that all individuals can and should play an active role in communities of which they are a part. This paper begins by looking at the context within which voluntary and community activity in older age occurs; it begins by outlining the nature of demography and ageing in England, before turning to take a brief look at the Big Society agenda and the demands that this appears to be making of volunteers. It then moves on to look at theories of the lifecourse and how these have been conceptualised to take a holistic view of the diverse lifecourses that individuals experience. Concepts such as third age and active ageing are discussed within the context of this lifecourse model. This is followed by the discussion of some of the findings emerging from my doctoral research, looking at how the voluntary and community activity that individuals do changes over the lifecourse, and how different types of volunteer pathway impact upon how individuals come to be volunteering in older age. I do this using four case study older volunteers from my research to illustrate four different broad themes of volunteer lifecourse.

Demographic and Political Context

First, it is important to outline why older age has become an important topic of academic investigation. If we're to consider older age, it is necessary first to define what we mean by that. There is little consensus on this, as within public policy, commercial and voluntary organisations different definitions exist (see DoH, 2001; Davis Smith and Gay, 2005; ONS, 2010). This paper defines older age as fifty plus, in common with Government policy, the current cross Council New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA research programme and the leading older peoples' charity Age UK, but recognise that within aged fifty-plus there is great

diversity, ranging from individuals with young children and potentially over a third of their paid working life ahead of them, to individuals increasingly dependent on others for support in their day-to-day lives. While estimates about the rate of population change vary – in part due to differences of definition – there is consensus that population in England (and in other advanced capitalist economies) are ageing at pace, and will continue to do so until at least 2050. Over this time, the average age of the population will rise, as will the ratio of older people to those of working age. Further, the patterns that cause this change – low birth and death rates – and thought to now be a permanent feature in western societies (Shaw, 2001; Tinker, 2002). As can be seen from Diagram 1, the proportion of both those over sixty-five – third agers who may be retired – and of those aged over 85 – often described as the "very old" – is set to grow significantly between now and 2034 (ONS, 2010).
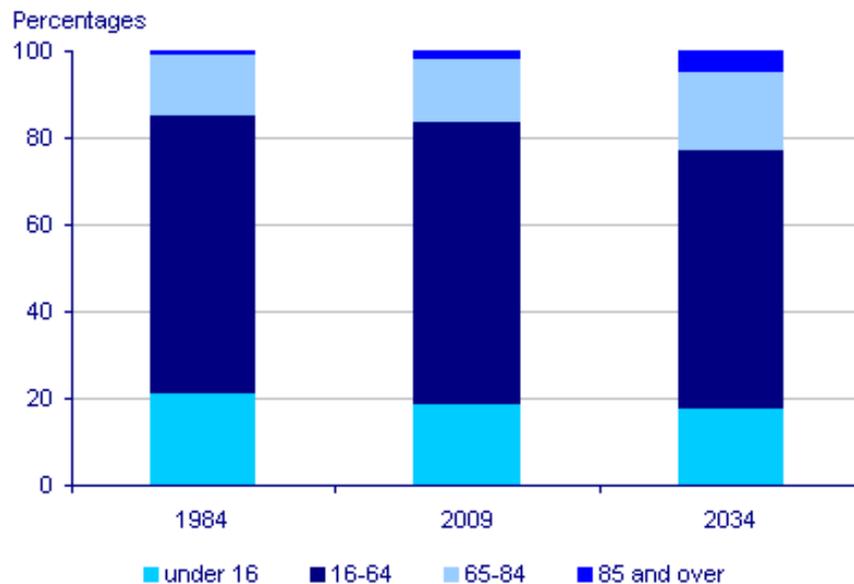

Diagram 1: UK population by age 1984, 2009 and 2034 (ONS, 2010)

The picture of how well represented older adults are in formal voluntary ad community activities is mixed; according to the Cabinet Office's Helping Out report (Low et al, 2007) sixty-four percent of those aged between fifty-five and sixty-four engage in formal volunteering either regularly or occasionally, the joint highest proportion of any age group. Yet the over sixty-five age group have the lowest participation rate of any age group (Low et al, 2007). Hardill (2003) states that the 1990s saw a trend towards higher rates of volunteering by retirees, yet as these figures show, those post-retirement age in particular remain less likely to volunteer than younger adults. It seems then that despite the

increased free time that retirement usually presents individuals with (Davis Smith and Gay, 2005) and the generally positive attitude that older adults have towards the principle of volunteering (Davis Smith, 2000), the proportion of people who volunteer falls when individuals get beyond sixty-five.

It is also important to look at the political context in which voluntary and community activity occurs. The Big Society philosophy has been a central to the Coalition government's political strategy over the first year of their rule. The central themes of the philosophy – compassionate conservatism, devolution of responsibility and empowerment of citizens – have been central to David Cameron's political ideology from before his election as Conservative Party leader in December 2005 (BBC, 2005). They were a key component of the Conservative's election manifesto; the first line in David Cameron's manifesto introduction is, "*A country is at its best when the bonds between people are strong*" (Conservative Party, 2010: viii). This was then followed after the 2010 General Election and Cameron becoming Prime Minister – albeit leading a Coalition Government after his Conservative Party failed to win a majority, by his stating that;

> "The success of the Big Society will depend on the daily decisions of
> millions of people – on them giving their time, effort, even money, to
> causes around them." (David Cameron, in Cabinet Office, 2010)

The implication of this quote is that individuals – all individuals – will need to give their time, effort and/or money for the greater good. There has already been some discussion of how access to some benefits may be conditional on participation in the Big Society (Kisby, 2010). In the discussion section of this paper we will explore whether events across the lifecourse may limit the amount of voluntary and community activity – those acts which make up the Big Society – that individuals can undertake.

Lifecourse Theory

There has been a recognition over the past thirty or so years, arising mainly out of feminist scholarship such as Rossi (1980) and Katz and Monk (1993), that a 'life cycle' model which assumes that individuals pass through prescribed stages is flawed, has lead instead to the term 'lifecourse' gaining greater currency. The life cycle model tended to assume a relatively rigid set of age categorisations, related to social norms about what activities and life events are expected at stages of life. This has been rejected by many writers because of the way in which it assumes multiple turns, a presumed fixed or inevitable series of events

occurring at certain chronological ages. Instead, lifecourse does not assume a stable social system of similar actors doing similar things at similar ages, rather one which is constantly changing and heterogeneous (Hockey and James, 1993; Hunt, 2005). Where in the past, stages of life may have been seen as stable and individuals to an extent constrained by the expectations placed upon them at different stages, marriage, parenthood and retirement in particular, now there is recognition that there is much variation in the way in which individuals pass through life; divorce, remarriage, step-children, early retirement and more contribute to the rich variety of social life.

While study of the lifecourse rejects the idea of predictable life events which occur at or around certain prescribed chronological ages, this is not to say that it is not concerned with transitions and events which impact upon individuals lives. Some life events, particularly in younger age, remain linked, loosely or otherwise, to chronological age; a child's first day at school, a Bar Mitzvah or an eighteenth birthday. Yet once an individual moves beyond childhood, the transitions, turning points and significant events are unpredictable, yet impact significantly on how individuals experience and interpret their lives. These transitions, or events, can have greater or lesser impact, can take place in public or in private and, and can affect just the individual or many others around them. Individuals enter older age with a history of family life, of paid employment, of social links, of volunteering and of all manner of other activities. Therefore, the transitions which occur after fifty need to be placed within a perspective of what has occurred before, as all these histories will impact upon the decisions older adults can or cannot make. Older age cannot be understood in isolation, as a stage of life distinct in itself, rather as the product of a life of events, transitions and experiences.

Third Age

Social gerontology has emerged as a discipline over the past twenty or so years, seeking to reconceptualise older age as a period when active and independent older people are free from many of the responsibilities of younger adulthood – often of paid work and of day to day childcare responsibilities (Laslett, 1989; Estes et al, 2003). This emerged as a critique of two significant ways of thinking about older age. Firstly, it challenged, and continues to challenge, the biomedical model which suggests older age as a time of physical and mental decline (Estes et al, 2003; Gergen and Gergen, 2003). This biomedical focus has often been hard to shift, with the emergence of gerontology as a discipline in the

1950s coinciding with a paradigm across the western world which viewed science and scientific explanations as fundamental to material progress (Achenbaum, 1995). Thus, the need to consider social aspects of ageing was often overlooked in favour of biomedical explanations. Secondly, it criticises the welfare model which predominates across the Western world, which it is suggested sees older people stereotyped as dependent and needing support, ignoring the enormous heterogeneity of older age and that the great majority of older adults have no different welfare needs to the wider population. Age is often used in the formation and articulation of expectations in terms of the rights allowed and resources allocated to individuals in society. Since the inception of pension rights in 1911 and the welfare state and universal social security in Britain in the 1940s, older adults have been assigned a particular model of citizenship which places them as being in receipt of funds and services provided by those in paid work (Crawford, 1971; Bytheway, 1997; Estes et al, 2003).

Arising from this critique, Laslett's (1989) theory of third age seeks to see active older age as a time of opportunities, when fit and healthy individuals can pursue their interests through a range of activities. For a great many older adults this picture is accurate, as the strength of the 'grey pound' and the number of products targeted at healthy older people proves. Yet this is not the case for all older adults; many are not fit and healthy, are unable to be independent and lack the resources – financial and other – to pursue their interests (Phillipson, 2002). In considering the voluntary and community activities that some older adults engage in, it is worth therefore remembering that many are unable to engage. Nonetheless, many are able to engage and many do, not just in voluntary and community activity but also in a wide range of other family, community and leisure activities. In order to explore how voluntary and community activities undertaken by older adults are related to their mix of work activities across the lifecourse – we now turn to use empirical description to understand the ways in which a commitment to voluntary and community activities, family responsibilities and paid work undertaken in the past shapes current commitments to volunteering in older age.

Methods
This paper now moves on to look at how the volunteer pathways which emerged from my research fit unto the lifecourse model, considering how voluntary and community activity across the lifecourse has fitted in and around the other activities that individuals undertake. The diagrams and case studies used to

illustrate this are taken from interviews undertaken for my doctoral research with twenty-six older volunteers, recruited from nine voluntary and community organisations across England. Participants were recruited using gatekeepers at these organisations, usually chief executives or volunteer managers, who were also interviewed as part of my research, although their responses will not be considered in this paper. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted around an hour, each taking a lifecourse approach by tracing an individual's voluntary and community activity from childhood through to the present day. This was contextualised by discussion of other activities that individuals had undertaken across their lifecourse; paid work, domestic responsibilities and other roles and tasks in which they had participated. The use of case studies allow us to explore wider themes of the TSOL and voluntary and community engagement, looking at how different modes of work entwine in particular individuals' lives (Harper, 1992; Yin, 2003; Hardill and Baines, 2009).

The diagrams in this paper use all twenty-six older volunteers' lifecourses, and four case studies are used to illustrate some of the key lifecourse themes which emerge from this diagrams. The diagrams[1] allow us to look at how different responsibilities and types of work interact with and impact upon one another. In order to situate voluntary and community activity in older age within the lifecourse, the graphs begin at the top at age thirty, and move down to the present day.

The three patterns of older volunteer lifecourse that I structure this analysis around was first proposed by Davis Smith and Gay (2005). I add to this by looking not just at how patterns of voluntary and community activity change across the lifecourse, but also how these patterns fit around patterns of other forms of work activity.

Pathway One: Constant Volunteers
The first lifecourse pattern that we look at is constant volunteers. These are those who have volunteered throughout their adult lives, and continue this into older age and retirement. A lifelong commitment does not necessarily mean constant service in the same role, and it was common for individuals as they got older to change in the roles they performed, as *Eric* notes;

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[1] In the diagrams, red bars represent paid work, blue bars unpaid domestic responsibilities (represented by marital status on the left and having children aged under eighteen on the right) and green bars represent being engaged in voluntary and community activity.
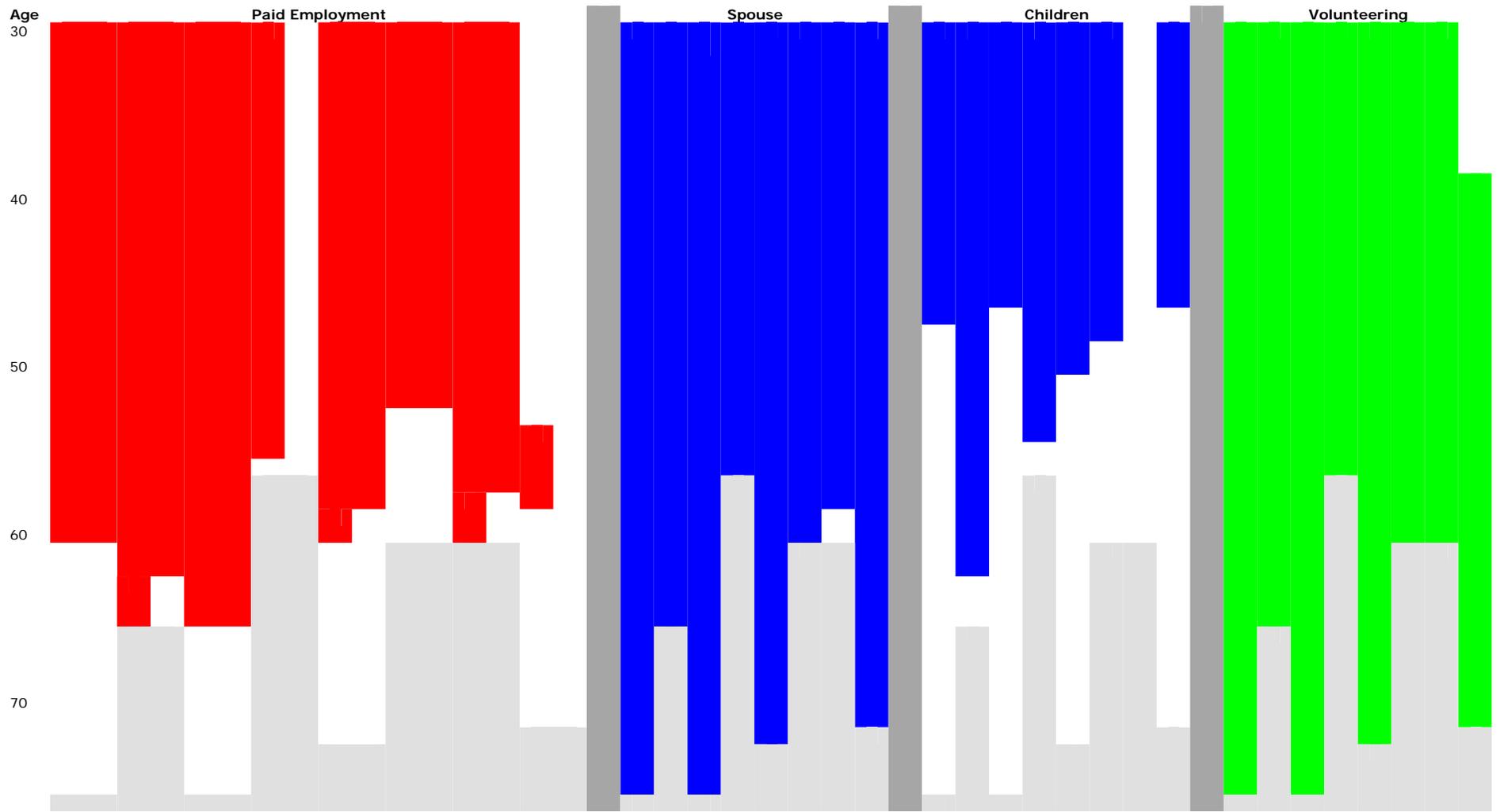
Diagram 2: Constant Volunteers' Lifecourses

> *"I think the things that I do have changed, I mean early on it was very much… working directly with young people. Now it's more third hand… So my roles have changed, it's become more and more remote from the front line young people."*

As well as changing roles within the organisation he has been with all his adult life, immediately on retirement *Eric* also took on two unpaid roles which related closely to his previous paid work, in local business groups and mentoring young entrepreneurs.

One interesting trend in terms of the mix of work activities that can be seen on *Diagram 2* among the lifelong volunteers is stability of marriage, and therefore likely stability of domestic work responsibilities. *Eric* highlights how his paid work and family commitments had meant he had had to manage their voluntary and community activities around their children when discussing why he has taken on different roles within the organisation at different stages in his life;

> *"During my working life I have worked pretty long hours, and over the years my base of operation has been different, so I haven't had the capacity to always get back for 6 o'clock on a Tuesday night… Plus there's our elder children grew up, then we had a third child and had a lot of transporting and taxiing to do from a semi-rural area…"*

Yet while these other work commitments impact upon *Eric's* volunteering, they occurred within a stable family unit, and therefore the balance of the different work roles could be managed.

Pathway Two: Serial Volunteers

Next we move to look at serial volunteers, those who have begun, stopped, started and restarted volunteering over their lives. As *Diagram 3* shows, the engagement in voluntary and community activity of these individuals is much more unstable than the lifelong volunteers. There is a gender dimension to this; more of the lifelong volunteers were male and more of these serial volunteers are female, and this links back to feminist work on the lifecourse which argues that female lives are subject to more disruption that male lives. This diagram clearly shows not just the instability of these individuals' voluntary careers, but also of their careers in paid work. For these individuals, paid work, domestic work and voluntary and community work have coexisted differently at different stages of life, with each having to be balanced, as *Nadia* illustrates;
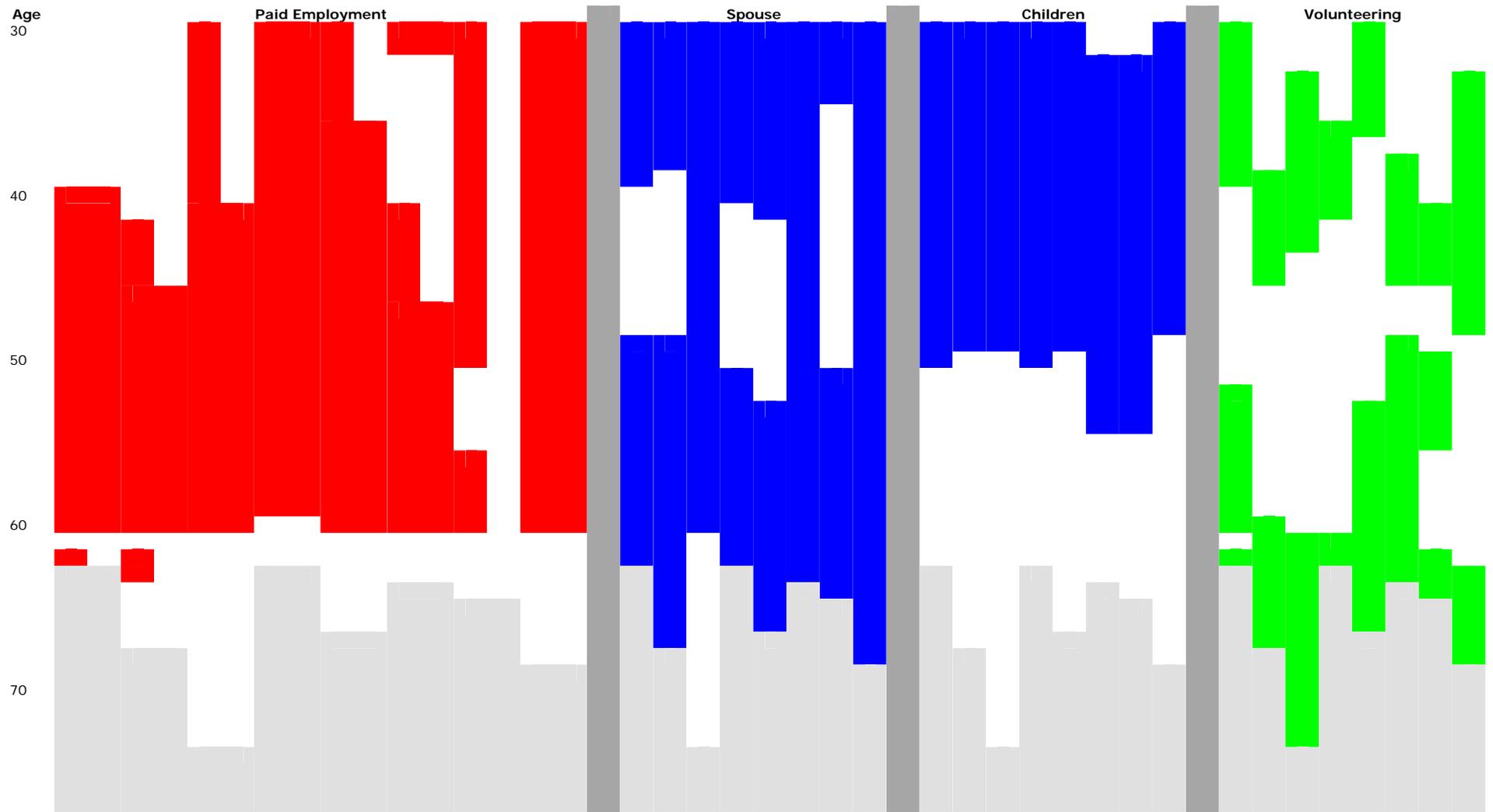
Diagram 3: Serial Volunteers' Lifecourses

> "*And I've been doing [my volunteering] off on and on for over twenty-five years. I started when my children were young, and I wasn't working, so I first came out with the [organisation] then. And then when I went back to work I couldn't come regularly, and I started again once I became self-employed, I kept Tuesdays as my day when I didn't work if possible and had the Tuesday working with the project.*"

In her retirement, *Nadia* has become a trustee of the organisation, because she feels that,

> "*But life now that we're retired, my husband took early retirement so he's been retired a lot longer than me, life is very easy, very easy. So I'm writing a book, instead! You can't leave these big gaps in your life when you're not doing anything.*"

It is clear then that volunteering is one part of how Nadia has constructed her lifestyle in her third age, alongside other leisure activities.

One life event that seems to have a significant impact on voluntary and community engagement is divorce. These impacts are highlighted by *Iain*, who explains how following his divorce;

> "*I also got divorced from my first wife, and my daughter's mother, at that time, so all sorts of things happened and my life changed.*"

This theme was repeated by other of the serial volunteers in this research, for whom divorce was a significant event in their lifecourse.   Reference to lives changing and having to deal with domestic issues illustrates the ways in which divorce affects the ways in which individuals construct their roles in the organisation of labour, and how life events may result in these roles having to be renegotiated and redefined.

Pathway Three: Trigger Volunteers

The third volunteer pattern this paper looks at is trigger volunteers. For these, first experiences of volunteering come in older age, with no (or in one case, very little) previous experience of volunteering. *Diagram 3* shows how many of the trigger volunteers were in full-time paid employment for the bulk of their adult lives, up until retirement. Indeed, of the trigger volunteers only one was not in full-time paid employment between the age forty and fifty-eight, and this was due to full-time caring responsibilities for a seriously disabled family member. The demands of a paid job were often cited by trigger volunteers as being prohibitive to undertaking voluntary and community activity while in paid employment, while
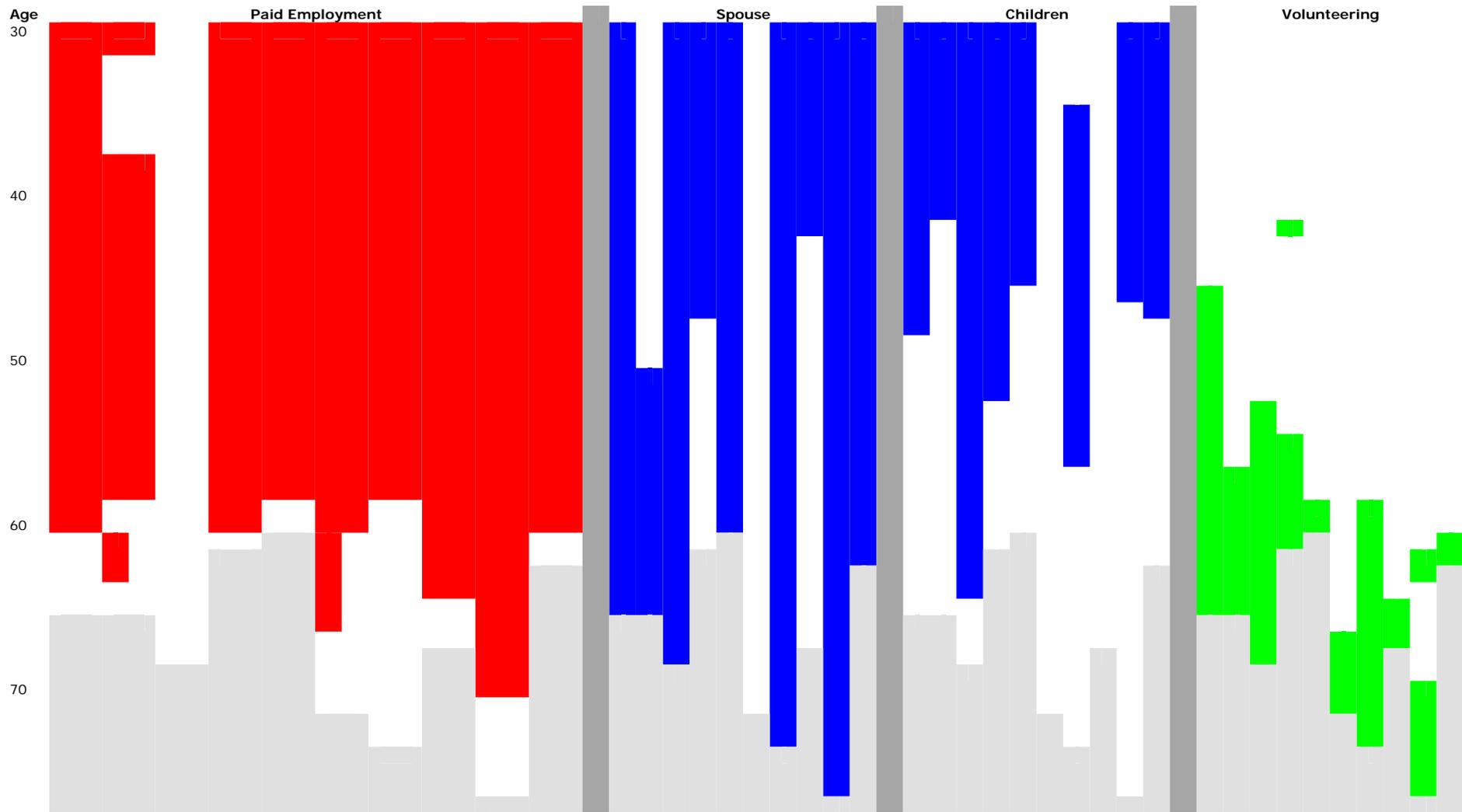
Diagram 4: Trigger Volunteers' Lifecourses

again domestic tasks were cited as placing a significant demand on individuals' time, as *Jack* outlines when discussing his previous brief voluntary activity;

> "*I'll be coming home very late hours which isn't like, 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 kind of not following that through truthfully, I'm actually not there to be reading the stories in bed sometimes, you know you go in cycles of saying I must be a better dad and then gradually getting pulled back in again.*"

Jack had not volunteered at all prior to retirement, and saw retirement as a time when he could be, "*more socially involved in help*" and that prior to retirement he had been unable to do "*very little*" in wider society.

Divorce, marriage in later life and never being married all appear in the domestic lives of this group of volunteers, each placing unique demands on the individuals involved, who may have to take on more domestic work, and indeed more paid work, than those with stable home lives.

Conclusions

As is shown by all three patterns of voluntary and community engagement, different periods in each different individual's lifecourse has impacted on the amount, of any, time and effort they are able to give. Some individuals have a relatively stable domestic background and paid work career, yet even for these engagement amount and type is dictated by their other commitments, as *Eric's* example shows. Others have had to stop and start their voluntary and community activities because of the demands of other roles; for *Nadia* the need to balance it with paid work once her children were at school and for *Iain* the impact of his divorce and domestic commitments and paid work role. For *Jack*, a time-consuming paid career and a desire to spend more time with his own children meant that there simply wasn't time to volunteer while in paid work. Retirement has offered Jack his first chance to volunteer, and he has taken on a number of roles in his retirement.

These different lifecourses, and the different volunteer pathways that they present, makes an important critique to Cameron's idea of the Big Society. The quote at the start of this paper suggested that all individuals are expected to play their role in the Big Society, against a backdrop of spending cuts and the withdrawal of many public services. Yet lifecourse events, changing

circumstances and the wide mix of work activities that all individuals have to manage mean that voluntary and community engagement is not always possible. While third agers have fewer other responsibilities, it should not be left to them to support the Big Society project. The pathways that they take to volunteering are many and varied, representing unique backgrounds and journeys to their present engagement. Forcing individuals down these pathways in the name of Big Society will not work.

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