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**FIFTY AT FIFTY: long term patterns of participation  
and volunteering among the 1958 NCDS Cohort at  
age 50**

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## Abstract

Fifty at Fifty (50 at 50) combined longitudinal quantitative data from the 1958 British Birth Cohort Survey, i.e. the National Child Development Study (NCDS), with qualitative biographical interview data from the associated Social Participation and Identity Study (SPIS) to investigate long term patterns of participation and volunteering. Fifty interview transcripts were abstracted for analysis from the SPIS. These related to individuals who presented three distinct, and intrinsically interesting, patterns of participation within the NCDS data – non-participants, perennial participants, and frequent participants at age 50. At odds with most previous findings on the characteristics of participants *vis-a-vis* non-participants, quantitative data records indicated that these individuals shared numerous demographic traits. The SPIS data seemed potentially well placed to illuminate why these relatively similar individuals demonstrated noticeably different patterns of participation.

The study's major contribution is to the debate around data triangulation, in terms of the role methods play in defining and measuring participation and volunteering, and the potential for certain methods to 'miss' particular forms or levels of these activities. Comparing between the datasets, at times noticeably different narratives of participation emerged with alignment being poorest for those individuals identified in the quantitative data as non-participants. For these individuals, the SPIS often revealed a diverse range of occasional, past and informal involvements. Religious participation, too, produced divergent stories in the datasets. Further, the qualitative transcripts revealed a greater number of associational affiliations than the quantitative data while, conversely, trade union and political activity was rarely mentioned in the qualitative interviews, even though the quantitative data indicated that it was widespread. Several factors might explain the 'gap' between the datasets. Key amongst these are: (1) the timing of key life events, and the consequences of these transitions upon subsequent participation, (2) the way the NCDS appears to privilege 'joining in' with associations over other forms of participation, and (3) the pathways through participation that were picked up in the qualitative interviews, and those that were not pursued.

Multiple forms of participation and volunteering were identified amongst the 50 interviewees while multiple motives drove these activities. There were similarities in motive between the three types of participant but, notably, relevant to the frequent and non-participants, altruistic motivations played a more central role in perennials' long-term commitment. Triggers, both people and events, were important in providing opportunities for individuals to participate in desired and unfamiliar ways, but these were not equally accessible. Conversely, workplace factors, such as shift work and self-employment, had a major impact upon an individual's ability to get and stay involved. Future research

investigating the precise impact and mechanisms of these catalysts will provide further valuable insight into participation and volunteering pathways.

### **Keywords**

Participation, volunteering, non-participants, longitudinal research, mixed methods, motivations, barriers, life-course, pathways, National Child Development Study, Social Participation and Identity Study, panel data

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## Introduction

The measurement of voluntary activity through surveys is sometimes challenged on the grounds that respondents are typically presented with a menu of options which may not correspond with their understanding of voluntary action. A research strategy that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches may go some way to remedying this problem. However, studies which allow us to compare survey-based reports of voluntary action with qualitative accounts from individuals about the activities they carry out are few and far between.

Fifty at Fifty (50 at 50) is a mixed methods study combining longitudinal quantitative data from the 1958 British Birth Cohort Survey, i.e. the National Child Development Study (NCDS), with qualitative biographical interview data from the associated Social Participation and Identity study (SPIS) (Elliott et al., 2010). It sought to explore the experiences of, and attitudes towards, participation and volunteering amongst a sub-sample of the 1958 cohort. The SPIS ran alongside the 2008 wave of data collection for the NCDS and thus engaged with cohort members when they were aged 50<sup>1</sup> (Elliott et al., 2010). A stratified sampling approach was used to select NCDS participants for inclusion in the SPIS so that findings could be generalised to the wider NCDS cohort (Elliott et al., 2010). Ultimately, qualitative interviews with 220 participants were carried out. Boxes 1 and 2 provide background on the methods and aims of the NCDS and SPIS.

Combining the NCDS and SPIS datasets created the opportunity to explore participation and volunteering across the life course, and consider this in the context of an individual's personal history and their evolving social, economic and personal circumstances. Brodie et al. (2009: 33) argue that such issues are under-researched, but are integral to a better understanding of participation and people's pathways through participation. For the ESRC, while various studies have explored motivations for participation, "fewer" have investigated "how individuals participate and get involved over time, how their experience might change with life stages, and how different episodes in their lives might be connected" (2007:2). The 50 at 50 study was designed to begin to address this apparent lacuna in the literature.

Initial analysis of the quantitative data compiled on the 220 participants in the SPIS revealed markedly different stories of participation and volunteering. While some had never participated in clubs, societies and social activities, others were long standing participants always reporting, in every wave of the NCDS, that they 'joined in' with such organisations and pursuits. Interestingly, and unexpectedly, the individuals who displayed these two

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<sup>1</sup> 364 members of the NCDS cohort were interviewed after their 51st birthday (Parsons, 2010: 2)

particular narratives shared key demographic characteristics. While some of this similarity is explained by the presence of certain biases within the NCDS and SPIS samples<sup>2</sup>, importantly, the literature suggests that those who participate or volunteer tend to look quite different from those who do not, while the characteristics of participants differ between types of participation activity.

Older adults are generally more likely to participate than are younger adults (Putnam, 2000; Selbee and Reed, 2001). Those with higher educational qualifications are more likely to volunteer than are those who left school at 16 (Musick and Wilson, 2008). Individuals from “non-white backgrounds” have been identified as “particularly less engaged” (Brodie et al., 2009: 25). The participants in local decision making, such as those who attend public consultations, tend to be older, affluent, white, middle class, better-educated males, while the typical formal volunteer is a middle-aged, degree-educated female in a higher social class and occupying a managerial role (Brodie et al., 2009: 22-23). Individuals who account for a disproportionately large share of volunteering, charitable-giving and participation in groups, clubs and organisations, are more likely than their counterparts to be affluent, middle-aged and in managerial and professional occupations (Mohan and Bulloch, 2012: 10). They are also more likely to have higher educational qualifications, actively practice their religion and to have lived in the same area for at least 10 years (Mohan and Bulloch, 2012: 10).

Biographical interview data from the SPIS seemed potentially well-placed to illuminate why relatively similar individuals demonstrated noticeably different patterns of participation. Using the qualitative interview data to explore the experiences of, and attitudes towards, participation and volunteering, plus the wider life stories, of individuals presenting distinct patterns of participation in the NCDS data, formed, then, the central concern of the study. Consequently, review of the NCDS quantitative data led to the selection of qualitative interview transcripts for analysis and provided a rich catalogue of demographic and socioeconomic information, spanning a 50 year period, in which to situate and appreciate interviewees’ lived experiences. Ultimately, 50 interview transcripts were selected for study. These were associated with individuals who, in most cases, were aged 50 and who demonstrated noticeably different, and particularly intriguing, patterns of participation in the NCDS data. This context provides the origins of the study title, *Fifty at Fifty*. It also echoes Sherrott’s (1983) in-depth study using retrospective interviews to chart individual volunteering trajectories.

Notably, the study found that, for some interviewees, the patterns of participation revealed in the NCDS differed from those that emerged in the SPIS. This finding connected the study to debates about data triangulation and the status and nature of quantitative *vis-a-vis*

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<sup>2</sup> In its first phase, (see Box 2), the SPIS over-represented women in part-time work and under-represented men and women who were not working (Elliott et al., 2010: 32).

qualitative data, while it prompted an interest in exploring how far, and in what ways, the stories revealed in the former related to those contained in the latter. The study's major contribution perhaps lies in the findings it presents on this last issue. These findings relate to ongoing debates about the role of methods in structuring the type and level of participation and volunteering identified in research, and the potential for certain methods to 'miss' particular forms or levels of these activities.

#### Box 1: The National Child Development Study (NCDS)

The NCDS, originally the Perinatal Mortality Survey, collected information on more than 17,000 babies born within one week in 1958. The objective was to examine the social and obstetric factors associated with stillbirth and death in early infancy (Parsons, 2010: 2). Since then, eight further waves of data collection have taken place in 1965, 1969, 1974, 1981, 1991, 2000, 2004 and 2008. Information was originally collected from interviews conducted with cohort members' parents and teachers and from medical examinations and educational tests that cohort members completed (Elliott et al., 2010: 6). From age 16 onwards, the cohort members themselves were interviewed. As adults, the NCDS has collected data on cohort members' physical and mental health, social participation, demographic characteristics, employment, housing and attitudes (Elliott et al., 2010: 6). Around 9,790 cohort members took part in the 2008 wave (Parsons, 2010: 2). The NCDS is on-going. The most recent sweep is scheduled for 2013-14.

#### Box 2: The Social Participation and Identity Study (SPIS)

The overarching objective of the study was to investigate the association between social mobility experiences and patterns of participation (Elliott et al. 2010: 3). Using a stratified sampling approach, 238 members of the NCDS were initially contacted in three geographic regions - the North West of England, the South East of England, and Scotland - for inclusion in the SPIS. The sample was stratified on two main criteria: geographic location and social mobility. In this phase of the study, 170 interviews were carried out (86 men and 84 women) in 2008 and 2009 (Parsons, 2010). Subsequently, beginning in 2010, 50 further interviews were carried out with cohort members living in Wales (Parsons, 2010). A topic guide steered the interviews. Topics included: social participation, identity, neighbourhood and belonging, leisure activities, family and friendships, life history and reflections on being part of the NCDS (Elliott et al., 2010). The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

This paper is divided into eight sections; the next section further introduces the concept of 50 at 50 which orientated the study. The research methods are then introduced followed by

four sections which outline the study's main empirical findings. To close, a final section presents a number of overarching conclusions, considers the study's findings in relation to policy, and suggests a number of future directions for research.

### Fifty at Fifty: frequent, perennial and non-participants

The study was structured around the theme of '50 at 50' - 50 interview transcripts were selected from the SPIS population of 220 and, in most instances, these were associated with individuals aged 50. Time constraints, and the accessibility of the theme 50 at 50, informed this approach. The transcripts related to individuals demonstrating three distinct, and intrinsically interesting, patterns of participation within the NCDS data – non-participants, perennial participants, and frequent participants at age 50 (see Appendix 1). These patterns focused on three dimensions of participation: intensity, longevity and type of activity (see Methods).

Individuals identified as *non-participants* reported, in every wave of the NCDS, that they did not volunteer and took no part in a wide range of social activities and groups raised within the NCDS quantitative interviews. Individuals identified as *perennial participants* reported in every wave of the NCDS that they 'joined in' with at least one of these groups and/or activities. This included joining in with environmental, charitable, residents' and school-related associations, trade union activity, and religious activity. Importantly, membership of an organisation was not sufficient to identify an individual as a perennial participant - they had to report that they 'joined in' with an organisation. By focusing on these two diametrically opposed patterns of participation, insights into why some people never participate, why some people always participate, as well as potential barriers, triggers and aids to participation, were possible. Finally, individuals identified as *frequent participants* reported, in the most recent completed wave of the NCDS (in 2008), that they volunteered at least once a week, or joined in with the activities of at least three organisations in a typical week. Attention focused here, then, on individuals who were currently highly active volunteers and participants. Age has been linked to volunteering and participation (Putnam, 2000). Selbee and Reed (2001) have suggested that volunteering increases with age, reaching a peak as individuals enter their late 40s and 50s. Against this background, it seemed interesting to investigate the stories and experiences of individuals who, as they enter their 50s, appear to be extremely involved in groups and/or volunteering.

Significantly, the patterns of participation and volunteering that could be identified within the NCDS data, and the dimensions that structured these patterns, were contingent on the type of data assembled within each wave of the NCDS. For example, it was not possible to identify a pattern of continuous volunteering because the NCDS did not ask cohort members

about volunteering at every wave of data collection. Thus, the concepts and participation patterns of a non-participant, perennial participant and frequent participant were constructed on the basis of, and reflect the data available within, the NCDS. These terms then, have particular meanings within the context of the 50 at 50 study and these may differ from meanings found within the wider participation and volunteering literature.

## Methods

The *non-participants* were chosen using the criteria supplied in the data dictionary which accompanies the SPIS (Elliott et al., 2012). One of the derived variables supplied with the interviews (*'org23to50'*) coded for social participation at each wave of data collection. An individual was identified as a *social participant* if he or she was a member of certain groups or took part in certain social activities when interviewed during a wave<sup>3</sup>. Importantly, and differing from some definitions (see Brodie et al. 2009), the concept of social participant in this coding approach did not usually include volunteering. Of the 220 qualitative interviewees included in the SPIS, 21 had quantitative data records that suggested they had never taken part in these groups and social activities. Their records also indicated that, in the waves of the NCDS where it was explored, these individuals were not participating in any form of voluntary activity. The transcripts for all 21 interviewees were selected for qualitative coding and analysis.

Respondents were identified as *perennial participants* only if they had joined in with group activities at *all* adult waves of the NCDS. 20 interviewees (out of the 220) had quantitative data records which suggested they could be identified as perennial participants. Four of these individuals also, though, presented as frequent participants, on the basis of volunteering at least once a week at age 50 or joining in with three or more organisations a week at age 50. These individuals were included as perennial participants in order to maximise the size of the group displaying a participation pattern which seemed potentially well placed to illuminate the issue of why people continue to participate (Rochester, 2006). The transcripts for all 20 individuals were selected for qualitative coding and analysis.

To identify the *frequent participants*, a new set of data code was written. This code described interviewees as frequent participants only if, as noted, in the most recent completed wave of the NCDS, they had volunteered at least once a week, or joined in with the activities of at least three organisations in a typical week. Through this approach, 15 individuals were identified (as discussed, four of these individuals could also be identified as

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<sup>3</sup> At age 23, these were voluntary work, youth club involvement, sports, discos and attendance at religious meetings. At ages 33, 42, 46 and 50, slightly different sets of organisational memberships were used, alongside attendance at religious meetings or services. Details are available in the UK Data Archive User Guide for this study (number 6691).

perennial participants and indeed were included in the study as perennials). Guided by the theme of 50 at 50, eight individuals were sampled from this group for inclusion in the research as frequent participants. Their interview transcripts were coded and analysed. The sample included all individuals who presented quantitative data records that indicated involvement in three or more organisations in a typical week (two individuals), and a random sample of individuals whose records indicated volunteering at least once a week (six individuals).

Through these sampling techniques, 49 transcripts were selected for analysis. To achieve the target of 50 at 50, the transcript for the only individual identified in the SPIS as unemployed<sup>4</sup> was selected for analysis (unemployment was under-represented in the SPIS sample (Elliott et al., 2010). Unemployment has been associated with low levels of participation (see The Citizenship Survey (DCLG and National Statistics, 2011)). It was thought interesting then to explore the volunteering and participation experiences and attitudes of this individual through reference to their biographical interview data.

The 50 interview transcripts were imported into QSR NVivo 10 for qualitative coding and analysis. A part inductive, part deductive approach to coding was adopted; themes were identified through repeated reading of the transcripts and reference to the participation and volunteering literature. The identified themes related to types of participation and volunteering, barriers to participation, the benefits of participation, motives for participating and routes into participation. Owing to the wide ranging nature of the SPIS interviews (see Box 2), codes relating to identity, family, nationality, friendships, career and education were also identified.

As the basis upon which we sampled the transcripts, the three stories of participation identified in the NCDS data structured the qualitative analysis process. The transcripts associated with the individuals identified in the NCDS as frequent participants were treated as one group. The transcripts associated with the individuals identified as perennial participants were treated as another group, and so on. Frequent participants had the most to say about participation and volunteering with their interview transcripts averaging 53 pages compared to 43 pages for the perennials and 38 pages for the non-participants. The three stories of participation serve to structure this paper. The individuals identified as frequent and perennial participants in the NCDS are considered as two separate groups in the section 'The NCDS-identified frequent and perennial participants' while the individuals identified as non-participants are considered as a single group in the section 'The NCDS-identified non-participants'.

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<sup>4</sup> Among all 220 interviewees, a total of 11 individuals were out of the labour market for reasons other than unemployment (e.g. they were identified as permanently sick/disabled, wholly retired, in full time education).

A summary biography was created for each interviewee following the qualitative analysis of their interview transcript. These biographies supported an appreciation of the individual ‘in the round’ and allowed their participation narrative to be considered in the context of their whole life story. Abbreviated versions of these biographies are presented, in text boxes, throughout this paper. Quotes from the interview transcripts, presented in italics, are woven throughout the paper with all interviewee names being pseudonyms.

### The Frequent, Perennial and Non-participants: demographic traits and (non) participation habits

Within this section, we present a *quantitative* overview of the three ‘types’ of participant – frequent, perennial and non-participant – identified within the NCDS data. These categories are not and were not intended to be exhaustive. Other patterns of participation and volunteering were evident amongst the 220 individuals included in the SPIS. A revealing account of the varied ways in which people volunteer and participate would be possible if future research attended to an exploration of these alternative patterns. This section focuses on the key demographic characteristics, discussed first, and participation patterns, discussed second, of these three types of participant. Although some clear ‘fault lines’ between the three were evident, it is important to note that the sample size within the 50 at 50 study (n=50) was quite small. The results for the sample were therefore compared to the whole NCDS cohort.

Our sample of 50 out of 220 qualitative transcripts included eight frequent participants (3.6% of the SPIS), 20 perennial participants (9.1% of the SPIS) and 21 non-participants (9.5%)<sup>5</sup>. Applying the same selection criteria to the whole cohort identified 443 frequent participants (2.4% of the cohort at age 50), 344 perennial participants (1.9% of the cohort) and 8,210 non-participants (44.2%). It is clear, then, that non-participants were underrepresented in the SPIS. This finding is intriguing and seems worthy of further research.

There were more similarities than differences between the three types of participant. The perennial and non-participants were very similar to one another, and to the wider group of 220: they were indistinguishable in terms of region, marital status, childrearing and care for elderly relatives. There was, however, a gender difference: the perennial participants were more likely to be women. For participants, both frequent and perennial, the key differentiator was level of education. Participants were generally much better educated than non-

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<sup>5</sup> The sample also included one unemployed person, to achieve a target sample of fifty.

participants, and the wider cohort. Table 1<sup>6</sup> shows the highest educational qualification held by participant type, the SPIS as a whole, and the entire NCDS cohort at age 50.

Table 1: highest educational qualification

	None	NVQ-1	NVQ-2	NVQ-3	NVQ-4	NVQ-5	Total
Non-participant	3 14%	4 19%	8 38%	1 5%	5 24%	0 0%	21 100%
Perennial	1 5%	2 10%	2 10%	4 20%	11 55%	0 0%	20 100%
Frequent	0 0%	0 0%	1 12.5%	1 12.5%	6 75%	0 0%	8 100%
SPIS (all 220)	13 6%	22 10%	40 18%	36 16%	91 41%	18 8%	220 100%
NCDS cohort age 50	1096 11%	1087 11%	2491 25%	1686 17%	2998 31%	425 4%	9783 100%

Compared to other groups, and to the cohort, non-participants were much more likely to have no educational qualification higher than a GCSE or O-level: 71% of non-participants fell into this category, compared to 47% of the cohort, 34% of the SPIS and just 25% of the perennial participants. Degree status set the frequent participants apart from other groups. Seventy-five per cent of the frequent participants held a degree level qualification.

Table 2 shows educational qualifications for the non-participants, perennial participants and frequent participants identified from the whole cohort (that is, those from the NCDS cohort who shared the participation characteristics of the various subsets of our sample, identified using the Stata code described previously).

<sup>6</sup> For all tables, percentages may not sum correctly because of rounding.

Table 2: highest educational qualification – comparing cohort-wide groups

	None	NVQ-1	NVQ-2	NVQ-3	NVQ-4	NVQ-5	Total
Non-participant - cohort	472 23%	349 17%	583 29%	280 14%	289 14%	36 2%	2009 100%
Perennial - cohort	7 2%	11 3%	52 15%	41 12%	206 60%	27 8%	344 100%
Frequent - cohort	29 5%	39 7%	101 18%	99 18%	251 46%	30 6%	549 100%

It is clear that educational qualifications were markedly different between the participants and non-participants. Participants (both perennial and frequent) were more likely than not to have a degree level qualification or higher. Level of education is a strong predictor of participation (Brodie et al., 2009). Musick and Wilson (2008: 120) have suggested that “the more education people have the more extensive and heterogeneous are their social networks, which increase the chances they will be asked to volunteer”. Further, educational qualifications “are a form of credentialing, signalling one’s capabilities to do voluntary work” and this can make individuals attractive to volunteer recruiters (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 120).

Given the different levels of educational qualification among the different groups, it is unsurprising that there was also a difference in social class measured by type of occupation. Participants were more likely to be in occupations from social classes I and II than were non-participants (and, indeed, the rest of the cohort). Around 34% of the cohort-wide non-participants were in social classes I or II, compared to around 60% of the frequent participants and 67% of the perennial participants. This effect was somewhat concealed by the small sample size of the original groups: comparing non-participants, perennial participants and frequent participants from among the original SPIS sample of 220 reveals very little difference (see Table 3).

Table 3: social class at 50

	I	II	III-NM	III-M	IV	V	Total
Non-participant	1 5%	9 45%	7 35%	1 5%	2 10%	0 0%	20 100%
Perennial	2 11%	7 39%	3 17%	3 17%	3 17%	0 0%	18 100%
Frequent	1 12.5%	4 50%	0 0%	1 12.5%	2 25%	0 0%	8 100%
Non-participant - cohort	52 3%	470 31%	357 23%	356 23%	230 15%	71 5%	1536 100%
Perennial - cohort	37 12%	165 55%	63 21%	17 6%	20 7%	1 0%	303 100%
Frequent - cohort	37 9%	215 50%	80 19%	50 12%	39 9%	6 1%	427 100%
SPIS (all 220)	19 9%	87 43%	47 23%	30 15%	17 8%	4 2%	204 100%
NCDS cohort age 50	511 6%	3,385 41%	1,635 20%	1,562 19%	912 11%	205 3%	8,210 100%

This conforms broadly to a ‘dominant status’ explanation of volunteering (Smith, 1994) in which volunteering activity is seen to be most common among those holding a dominant status in society, that is, men, those with higher education, those in non-manual jobs, people who are married and parents, people who are healthy and not disabled, and individuals with higher incomes or wealth.

However, the dominant status paradigm breaks down for this cohort when gender is considered. Although the sex differences that we saw in the sample groups of participants (two thirds of non-participants and of perennial participants were women) were only partially borne out when examining the larger groups drawn from the whole cohort (Table 4), there is still a preponderance of women over men among the active participants.

Table 4: sex

	Male	Female
Non-participant - cohort	4231 52%	3976 48%
Perennial - cohort	107 31%	237 69%
Frequent – cohort	241 44%	308 56%

Participants were more likely than non-participants to be women: nearly 70% of the perennial participants were women, and 56% of the frequent participants. Non-participants were only 48% female, and in this respect they exactly resembled the whole NCDS cohort.

Participants and non-participants were differentiated in terms of their own self-assessed health. Frequent and perennial participants were less likely to assess their health as 'poor'. Nine percent of non-participants were in poor health, compared to 5% of frequent participants and 3% of perennial participants.

Although marital status appears to differentiate the participators from the non-participators, it was difficult to draw firm conclusions from such a small sample (Table 5). For example, the divorce rate among frequent participants looks particularly high at nearly 38%. However, this was not borne out in the levels of divorce for frequent participants in the whole cohort. In fact, using the quantitative data from the whole cohort, there was little difference between frequent, perennial and non-participants in terms of marital status. However, perennial participants were slightly more likely to be married and less likely to be divorced than other groups.

Table 5: marital status at 50

	Single	Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed	Other	Total
Non-participant	2 10%	16 76%	1 5%	2 10%	0 0%	.	21 100%
Perennial	2 10%	13 65%	0 0%	3 15%	2 10%	.	20 100%
Frequent	0 0%	5 62.5%	0 0%	3 37.5%	0 0%	.	8 100%
Non-participant - cohort	253 13%	1243 62%	78 4%	378 19%	41 2%	21 1%	2014 100%
Perennial - cohort	30 9%	282 82%	5 1%	22 6%	4 1%	1 0%	344 100%
Frequent - cohort	43 10%	314 71%	16 4%	62 14%	8 2%	0 0%	443 100%
SPIS (all 220)	18 8%	165 75%	4 2%	31 14%	2 1%	.	220 100%
NCDS cohort age 50	1,044 11%	6,729 69%	315 3%	1,514 15%	137 1%	51 1%	9,790 100%

Similarly, self-employment was over-represented amongst the frequent participants from the SPIS: however, these findings were not borne out among the frequent participants from the whole cohort. The most notable difference was for part-time employment (“PT emp” in Table 6). For the perennial participants, who had the highest levels of part-time employment at 25%, the difference may be explained by the gender split: there are more women than men in part-time employment, and there were more women than men in the group of perennial participants. Gender may also play a role in explaining the employment patterns of the frequent participants. “Homemakers” are included in the category “Other”: there were relatively more homemakers in the group of frequent participants than in other groups. Homemakers may have more flexibility in their participation decisions and be able to devote more time to volunteering.

Table 6: economic activity

	FT emp	PT emp	FT self-emp	PT self-emp	U	Sick	Other	Total
Non-participant - cohort	992 49%	289 14%	215 11%	43 2%	84 4%	173 9%	216 11%	2014 100%
Perennial - cohort	184 53%	87 25%	29 8%	7 2%	4 1%	5 1%	27 8%	344 100%
Frequent - cohort	195 44%	87 20%	29 8%	7 2%	8 2%	28 6%	60 14%	443 100%

Lastly, the different groups were also compared using the personality scores from the eighth wave of the NCDS (Table 7). These measures are for extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and intellect (Goldberg, 1993). Participants of both types scored more highly than the cohort average on each of the ‘big five’ personality measures, except for conscientiousness. In this case, only perennial participants scored significantly better than average (t-test). The literature suggests that agreeableness and extraversion are the key pro-social personality traits, and are therefore most likely to be linked to activities such as volunteering (Carlo et al., 2005). Personality traits such as intellect have also been linked to political acts such as voter turnout (Denny and Doyle, 2008). It seems likely that the very broad definition of participation used here has contributed to this finding, but more research is needed.

Table 7: mean scores for the 'big five' personality traits, measured by IPIP in the NCDS

	Emotional stability	Agreeableness	Extraversion	Conscientiousness	Intellect
Non-participant - cohort	30.6	40.0	30.5	37.2	33.8
Perennial - cohort	33.6	43.2	33.7	38.5	36.8
Frequent - cohort	33.0	42.9	34.1	37.4	36.9
NCDS cohort age 50	32.0	40.7	32.3	37.5	35.4

Attention turns now to describing, in more detail, the styles of participation, or in some cases non-participation, associated with the frequent, perennial and non-participants as revealed in the NCDS quantitative data.

## **Frequent participation**

Most of the group of eight frequent participants included in the 50 at 50 sample were weekly volunteers, although one reported that she never volunteered. A similar pattern was found amongst the wider group of 443 frequent participants drawn from the whole cohort. An overwhelming majority (94%) were identified as frequent participants because of their volunteering. The remainder were identified as frequent participants if they had been active in three or more group activities per week (13%). The percentages do not sum to one hundred because some could be identified as frequent participants via both routes.

Frequent participants identified strongly as voters: 81% of the wider group said that they had voted in the last general election. They were also more likely than the wider group of all 220 interviewees to have engaged in other political acts. For example, 46% had signed a petition in the last year, compared to 20% of non-participants and 32% of the cohort as a whole. Around half of the SPIS frequent participants attended religious meetings at least weekly. Relatively high rates of religious practice were also observed in the wider group of frequent participants than from the whole NCDS cohort. Some 45% of them practiced their religion (all Christian), compared to just 18% among the cohort as a whole. However, it is important not to over-state the influence of religion on participation because attendance at religious meetings is a form of participation in and of itself and will have contributed to the number of groups attended by these frequent participants. Nevertheless, given that most frequent participants were thus classified on the basis of their volunteering (rather than on their weekly participation in groups), it is clear that the finding does have some relevance.

## **Perennial participation**

Members of this group of 20 were active participants at every adult wave of the NCDS. The wider group of perennial participants, as drawn from the whole cohort, numbers 344. Individuals from this wider group identified overwhelmingly as voters (91%). This group was the most likely to have signed a petition in the last year (53%).

Perennial participants differed markedly from the rest of the group of 220 in their religious practice, but again it is important not to over-state the influence of religion on participation because attendance at religious meetings or services is a form of participation in and of itself. Nine of the SPIS perennial participants achieved this 'status' purely through attendance at religious meetings. The inclusion of religious observance as a form of participation played a key role in skewing the gender of the perennials: eight of the nine religious perennials were women. Religious observance is more common among women than among men in this age group (Voas and Brierley, 2005).

## Non-participation

As discussed previously, the non-participants were defined using the data-driven description of social non-participation found in the data dictionary which accompanies the SPIS (Elliott et al., 2010). The definition of a non-participant is necessarily different at different waves: this is because there has been little stability in the questions between waves. In most waves, participation has been predicated on organisational membership. If a social activity takes place outside the embrace of membership, it has not generally been counted. The exception is attendance at religious services. In most waves, those who attend these services have not had to be *members* of a religious group for their participation to count. These non-participants, then, declared themselves to be non-members and non-attendees at religious services at every adult wave of the NCDS. They were also much less likely to have voted (57% were voters at age 50, compared to 82% of the whole group of 220).

### Competing narratives of participation: the experience of combining quantitative and qualitative data

For some individuals in the 50 at 50 sample, the patterns of participation revealed in the NCDS differed from those which emerged in the SPIS. In some instances, these differences seemed to be due to events that had occurred in the time that elapsed between the NCDS interview and the SPIS interview. In at least one case, this gap, and the events that unfolded within it, explained the emergence of noticeably different narratives within the datasets. Iona, an NCDS-identified perennial participant, had been involved in various activities and organisations at the time of the NCDS interview. However, between then and the SPIS interview, she was diagnosed with cancer and had started a programme of treatment. As a result, her participation and volunteering commitments were suspended at the time of the SPIS interview and so she emerged here as a non-participant (see Box 6).

Material differences were evident between our three types of participant in terms of the degree to which the stories of participation revealed in the quantitative data aligned with those contained in the qualitative data. Alignment was poorest for the individuals identified in the NCDS as non-participants. Often these individuals emerged in the SPIS data as past or occasional participants in groups, communities, organisations and social activities. This included attendance at evening classes and exercise classes, membership of gyms, social clubs and sports clubs and donating to charity. Several factors might explain why seemingly incompatible accounts of participation emerged.

First, the phrasing and sequencing of questions within the NCDS created a bias which meant that individuals who identified themselves as 'members' were more likely to be identified as people who 'joined in' which, in the context of our research, meant they were

more likely to be identified as 'participants'. Within the NCDS, respondents were asked to identify if they were a member of specific groups, and only if they answered yes to this question were they then asked if they 'joined in' with certain activities (Appendix 2). Joining in and membership were, then, intrinsically linked. As discussed, the only exception to this was in regards to attendance at religious services. The NCDS may then have failed to capture participation that occurred outside the embrace of membership, participation potentially picked up in the qualitative interview. Second, some participation might have been missed from an individual's quantitative record if respondents missed a wave of the NCDS<sup>7</sup>. Third, within the qualitative interviews, the focus on an individual's whole life, prompts and suggestions from the interviewer about different types of group and activity, and the extended and in-depth nature of discussion, might have encouraged a different kind of reflection than that achieved within the NCDS quantitative interview. This might have supported individuals in recognising and recalling examples of involvement and participation which may have been missed in the NCDS interview. Further, by discussing participation and volunteering in their own words, the qualitative interviews perhaps presented an opportunity for individuals to identify activities and groups not included as options within the NCDS. Finally, a desire to please the interviewer, or to construct a certain socially desirable image, since participation and volunteering are not value-free activities, might have led some individuals to over-claim when discussing their level of participation in the qualitative interviews (Weisberg et al., 1996). Collectively, these various points help highlight the role that methods play in structuring the level and type of participation and volunteering identified in research.

For those individuals identified in the NCDS data as frequent and perennial participants, the qualitative and quantitative datasets generally revealed broadly similar stories of participation and volunteering. Individuals with NCDS data records that indicated regular voluntary work or frequent participation in groups presented in the SPIS as frequent volunteers and participants. Those who demonstrated a longstanding record of participation in the NCDS data often reported a history of past and continuing involvement in the SPIS data. However, several points of divergence did emerge. There were often differences between the datasets in the number of organisations to which individuals were linked. The NCDS data often identified a lower number of organisational attachments than indicated in the qualitative interviews. Involvement in trade union and political activity, which the NCDS data suggested was relatively widespread amongst the perennial and frequent participants, was rarely mentioned in the qualitative interviews. A lack of probing and prompting about these activities within these interviews might explain their rather infrequent discussion. For a

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<sup>7</sup> It is useful to note that the sample assembled for the SPIS over-represented cohort members with a complete record of participation in the NCDS – i.e. they had never missed a wave of data collection (Parsons, 2010).

number of the perennial participants, the NCDS data suggested that religious activity was their main form of ongoing participation. This might lead one to assume that religion was a substantial component of their life story. However, in their qualitative interviews, these individuals rarely reflected on religious matters or identity and, for some, other forms of participation appeared of potentially greater 'interest' (see later and Mair, Box 3).

Box 3 Mair: infrequent attendee

Mair lived with her husband and daughter in Wales. The whole family had been devastated by the death of Mair's mother nine years ago, and this had been followed by a succession of deaths and poor health among her close family, such that she had needed to scale back her hairdressing work to care for elderly relatives. This had contributed to the strong sense that her life had been "*put on hold*". Caring for family members meant that she had no time to participate and volunteer: "*I've never really had the time to be honest*". Though she was engaged in the community through her role as care giver, this was contained within the family and was relatively invisible. Mair's leisure time was fairly privatised and revolved around walking the dog, visiting a friend and reading. While she used to attend church with an auntie, this had "*dwindled*" since her mother's death:

*'I never really joined anything, I'd go to the church bazaar and all that. But like my mother and my aunties were all in the church, you know, they were in the guild, they were the Secretary, they were this, they were that. So they played a big part in the church, perhaps I should have followed but I just went the other way and I'm still gone the other way at the moment.'*

A clearly divergent story of economic activity emerged between the quantitative and qualitative datasets for the individual identified within the NCDS data as unemployed. Ruth's qualitative interview described a major health crisis which prevented a return to work, and in fact had resulted in the suspension of many of her previous activities and pursuits, including participation in the local Parent Teacher Association. Since the crisis, she had attempted to get involved in volunteering in local charity shops, but her health had prevented her from providing the kind of commitment they expected.

Overall, it seemed that the category of 'long term sick/disabled', which is available within the NCDS, seemed to better capture Ruth's situation than the category of 'unemployed'. Retrospectively, Ruth's participation pathway (former, now impeded) was similar to some of the stories that emerged among the non-participants (see later), illustrating the importance of transitions and unexpected events upon participation.

## The NCDS-identified frequent and perennial participants

Individuals identified as frequent and perennial participants in the NCDS data correspondingly emerged in the SPIS data as active members of social clubs, churches and community groups, they were seen to undertake formal and informal voluntary work, give to charity and demonstrate various forms of civic involvement.

The frequent participants maintained demanding levels of input into social activities, often centred on a child's sporting activities and rooted in the local area. Their commitments included participation in residents' associations, community and environmental campaigns, and volunteering at local churches and schools. Personal networks and individual recruitment were important in facilitating their initial involvement. Almost half had received a direct invitation to join a group or activity, an important trigger in the literature (Rochester, 2006; Gibson, 1996). In several instances, individuals became aware of one group through their involvement in another. A snowball effect was thus apparent whereby participation in one organisation led to, or was associated with, participation in another. Brodie et al. (2009: 13) have suggested that the participation literature frequently neglects the "links between different participatory activities" and the presence of "overlapping boundaries" between activities. For the frequent participants, the links and overlapping boundaries between activities was notable.

Interestingly, amongst the frequent participants, the participation stories of the males always included a sports aspect. This finding was replicated amongst the male perennial participants. For John (Box 4), a frequent participant, and his wife, another frequent participant, sport formed a central component in their somewhat shared participation narratives. Both spent many hours at the poolside providing coaching and support to their son and daughter and other young, competitive swimmers. Conversely, amongst the four women in the frequent participant sample, only one mentioned an involvement in sport. This finding reflects findings from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Taking Part Survey (2008/9), which found that twice as many men as women volunteered in sports.

**Box 4 John: formal and informal frequent volunteer** (frequent participant)

John was married with two teenage children. His children were both competitive swimmers, which had a significant impact on the family's life. Both parents were extremely involved in their children's training schedules. These schedules structured their days and even their year as they affected when they could go on holiday. John was involved in swimming coaching and informal voluntary work like timekeeping at swimming sessions and events. John was self-employed in the hotel business and worked alongside his wife. His identity was very much bound up in his work. His late parents had been in the hotel business and his first job after leaving university was in the family-owned hotel. It seemed that being self-employed had provided John with the flexibility to plan his time around his children's training needs. However, this heavy involvement, plus work and domestic chores, meant that he had little free time. His leisure time was mostly spent watching TV, slotted in around taking his children to and from activities. Indeed, John had given up his role as a parish councillor because of work and family commitments. Before having children, John and his wife had enjoyed a busy social life and he suggested that when the children left home they could recapture this.

The individuals identified as perennial participants in the NCDS data shared, in one sense, key characteristics with Harrison and Singer's (2007) 'community conscious' group – they were mainly female and displayed strongly gendered patterns of participation, being at least partly motivated by improving conditions in their local community. However, on other characteristics, the perennials differed from this group – they were not an especially affluent collective and they seemed to be motivated by a deeper altruism than simply protecting the local (see Lorna's story in Box 5). For the female perennials, participation embraced formal volunteering, organisational membership and attendance, charitable giving, informal voluntary work, political involvement, and regular church attendance. By contrast, for the male perennials, participation was more club-orientated. Triggers were important in prompting the perennials into their initial involvement, although they talked more often about events than individuals in providing this '*push*'. Notably, a number of the most intensely committed perennial participants had relatively 'non-traditional' working patterns which, potentially, provided them with a greater amount of time in which to participate.

**Box 5 Lorna: formal volunteer** (perennial participant)

Lorna, a widow of over ten years, attended Catholic Church with her mother several times a week. She also volunteered fortnightly at the hospice that had provided her husband's end-of-life care, a commitment which she presented as reciprocating the kindness shown when her husband was most vulnerable: *"I saw the fantastic care that they gave and what a fabulous place that it was and I wanted to give something back."* Previous training in bereavement counselling, gained through her work as a police officer, gave Lorna the confidence that she had something to offer the hospice. A third commitment, volunteering for a Catholic marriage tribunal service where she acted as an auditor taking statements, had been suggested by her sister who recognised Lorna's natural aptitude, having long-standing experience in statement-taking through her police career. Indeed, Lorna derived a lot of satisfaction from her accomplishment in this voluntary work, which she explained in terms of offering her (occupational) 'services' in a context where there was a distinct place for them.

Informal volunteering saw perennial participants perform casual/ad-hoc voluntary work or 'helping out', often outside the parameters of established organisations. Traditional survey measurements can struggle to capture this type of activity rendering it invisible in some studies on volunteering. Further, these types of informal or community work have tended to be dealt with as an aside to formal voluntary work in the sociological literature (Taylor, 2005), an approach which has minimised critical differences in their form and meaning, and their importance as a resource in marginalised communities (Parry 2003, 2005). Of note, the SPIS interviews did not explicitly probe on informal volunteering or 'helping out', so it is very possible that they failed to capture all examples of such activity. Interestingly, it seemed that informal volunteering increased when an individual's child was younger, and when there were opportunities to participate in ways that supported a child's leisure activities. Among our 20 perennial participants, five discussed some form of current (at the time of the SPIS interview) informal volunteering: all of these were women. While this mainly entailed 'helping out' elderly or disabled neighbours with practical tasks - activities which were downplayed in terms of 'neighbourliness' - it also included occasional acts of assisting others in a rather more formalised participation or volunteering capacity.

Formal volunteering entailed diverse, formalised roles in a variety of organisations. To identify a few, there were roles in sports clubs: Howell was secretary of a bowls club, while Andrew coached and managed a youth football team; and roles in the church: Eileen, was part of her church's leadership team, and she gave sermons and performed various other duties with/for the congregation. There were political roles: Gwen was the chair of her local

community council, roles in schools, a couple were past or current school governors; and roles in health and social care settings: Iona (Box 6) volunteered as a counsellor.

Interestingly, among the perennials, understandings of the concept of volunteering appeared to differ. Anna did not see her role as secretary of the local Conservative Association as volunteering and, when directly asked whether she volunteered, commented, *“I like to say I did, really wished I did”*. By contrast, Eileen regarded her quite intensive church commitments as volunteering, language that other individuals active in the church generally avoided, although of course these activities were unpaid.

14 of the 20 perennial participants mentioned, in their qualitative interviews, some involvement in the church. For some, this religious participation simply meant attending religious services, but for others it meant ongoing involvement in the activities and *‘life’* of the church. Relevant here, Musick and Wilson’s (2003) analysis of three waves of the American Changing Lives survey found that volunteering in connection with a church was associated with more consistent volunteering and linked this to churches providing a supportive environment for this kind of continuity. Of the 14 individuals mentioning religious participation, church was *the* central form of participation for six: all were women. For others in this group, other forms of participation appeared of potentially greater ‘interest’. Iain’s participation narrative appeared to be more club than religion-orientated. Sally made minimal reference to her regular church attendance with her participation being characterised instead by long-standing support of the Labour Party and informal voluntary work at the local cricket club. Anwen’s participation was dominated by choir activity and associated fundraising work and, noting the many demands on her time, she reported that church attendance was the one form of participation she had let slip. Of the 6 individuals who did not mention religious participation, four were men (there were only five men in the perennial participant group). Discussed earlier, religious participation amongst the perennials was, then, strongly gendered.

The four individuals who presented in the NCDS data as both perennial and frequent participants appeared also, in the qualitative data, to share characteristics with these two types of participant. Three presented as diverse participants, with attachments to a number of organisations and activities, while one emerged as a religious participant, where a high level of commitment was focused on the church. For all four, their participation typically occurred within the embrace of established organisations and groups – the church, schools, charities and clubs. All undertook some form of formal voluntary work, although the type of work differed. Confirming findings in the NCDS data, the qualitative interviews for these individuals indicated that they all volunteered and/or participated frequently.

As to why the frequent and perennial participants participated, the 50 at 50 sample, by virtue of its stage in the life cycle - largely characterised by economic activity and established

careers - necessitated a perspective that looked beyond functional labour market explanations to understand why people got and/or stayed involved in pro-social behaviour. At age fifty, some interviewees had dependent children, and/or cared for grandchildren and/or had growing caring responsibilities for elderly parents, while for some, none of these obligations applied (see, for example, Miller (1981) on 'the sandwich generation'). These types of personal circumstances meant that for some in our sample there was a need to balance participation activities with paid employment and family responsibilities, but for others this was not the case (Sherrott, 1983).

For the frequent participants, several motives or reasons appeared to prompt initial and continued participation and/or volunteering, while various benefits or advantages were associated with these activities. Finding enjoyment and pleasure in a particular type of voluntary activity or form of participation was a common motive, and an important theme too for the perennials. For at least five of the eight frequent participants, socialising and/or friendships were identified as motives for joining in, or were presented as benefits derived from continued involvement. Low et al. (2007) have commented on volunteering being strategically deployed to meet people and broaden social networks.

Turning to the perennial participants, combining longitudinal data from the NCDS with the narrative reflective data of the SPIS proved invaluable in uncovering the journey that steered individuals to particular types of involvement and kept them there. Rochester has observed (2006) that the attention devoted to why and how people get involved has not been matched by an analysis of why they stay involved – this is exactly where the perennial participants might offer insight. Four key motives seemed to prompt their continued participation: a functional meeting of specific needs, an altruistic desire to do greater good, the personal benefits that were derived from involvement (such as satisfaction and/or enjoyment), and the sociability of participation, a set of motives clearly very similar to those identified for the frequent participants. One broad distinction, though, was that the frequent participants were generally more lucid on personal benefits than were the perennials. Notwithstanding this degree of emphasis, personal satisfactions were a key factor underpinning participation for both groups of participant.

With regards to participating in order to meet a specific need (a functional motive), there was some evidence of perennial participants, and frequent participants, participating in further education to support desired career progression or change.

An altruistic motive, whereby individuals participate in order to help others, seems most aligned with the traditional, perhaps outdated, understanding of volunteering (Smith, 1981). Where an altruistic motive was mentioned, the perennials differed in the degree to which it was emphasised, although it was rare for it to be presented as *the* driving force in a participation narrative. It was notable, however, that within the qualitative analysis, altruistic

explanations for participating and volunteering were identified more frequently amongst the perennial participants than the frequent or the non-participants. Thus, while for most of the perennials altruism provided only a partial explanation for their participation it appeared to be a more central aspect of their long-term commitment than it was for these other individuals.

A key finding of the 50 at 50 study's life course perspective on participation has been that many factors and transitions affect an individual's ability to engage in social and collective activities, and that trade-offs are made in order to reach a satisfying balance. Some transitions are more predictable and time-consuming, such as family formation and child-rearing, than are others. Health and mobility crises, bereavement and transitions associated with ageing (Parry et al., 2004) can be unexpected and throw a life, which may include certain participation commitments, into a state of flux. The impact of transitions upon participation patterns is illustrated by Iona's story in Box 6. She was going through a health crisis during her SPIS interview and her participation was consequently in an unforeseen state of transition. Her experience shows the degree to which circumstances can change quickly, be unpredictable, and may become overwhelming. If we are to understand participation over the life course, it is vital that the importance of transitions be built into this picture. There is a need to recognise the ebb and flow of demands on people's time and to appreciate how these demands can inform a person's willingness and ability to become and/or stay involved.

**Box 6 Iona: participation in transition** (perennial participant)

Iona, a single woman, had a lifelong history of participation in a diverse range of social activities, and was very confident and skilled at moving between organisations sharing her skills. Her involvement stemmed from personal convictions – in social welfare, sustainability and community cohesion - and was characterised by an altruistic motivation to improve conditions. Her volunteering to join the Samaritans, being herself a sociable and secure person, was typical of this altruism: *“I was watching something, I can’t remember what it was, it was probably a drama, and I suddenly thought how awful it would be to have nobody to talk to.”* When interviewed for the NCDS, she had a rich and varied record of participation, including her Samaritans volunteering, work for a PTA and residents’ association, club involvement, singing in a choir, and active fundraising running marathons for charity. However, a relatively short time later, when interviewed for the SPIS, her circumstances had completely and unexpectedly changed, and so too had her participation commitments. Her mother had died shortly before the NCDS interview and, weeks later, Iona was diagnosed with cancer. In the months since, she had undergone surgery and was still undergoing treatment. She was very weak and was focused on keeping on top of her job. It had been essential to scale back her participation: *“everything goes into fast-track really [...] since September I’ve had somebody else’s life”*

While the frequent and perennial participants had clearly not encountered insurmountable barriers to participation and volunteering, they did still face obstacles that informed their behaviour and served to limit greater degrees of commitment. Partly there is a methodological point here, in that it may be easier for individuals who have been active participants and/or volunteers than those who have no experience of these activities to reflect on barriers and draw meaningful observations about the impediments they afford.

For the frequents and perennials, working patterns appeared to be *the* primary obstacle with shift work, career ladder pressures, and changing working patterns sometimes making involvement difficult and/or restricting how often and how intensively individuals were able to participate. Lorna (Box 5), a perennial participant, pointed out, for instance, that the sometimes variable nature of shift-work means that people’s available free time often falls during anti-social hours and can change from week to week. Lorna felt that this could make it difficult to get involved or commit to particular sorts of social activity because some were perceived to require regular, consistent time investments. Conversely, for a couple of the frequents and perennials, self-employment appeared to offer a level of flexibility in the organisation of their working hours which facilitated a work-life balance that made room for participation and/or volunteering. For example, John (Box 4) and his wife’s intensive involvement in their children’s training schedules, which included a regular 4.30 am start and

late evenings, would have been inconceivable without the ability, as business owners, to arrange their own working days: *“having your own business is really important.”*

For some, family demands and fluctuating priorities were further factors that could limit an individual's level of participation. Caring for children, grandchildren, elderly parents and/or other family members reduced the amount of time they had available to allocate to such activities. In these circumstances, participation, in whatever form, became a luxury. Sian explained how she was investing ever more time in taking her children, as they grew up and took on more activities, to various appointments and noted that this left less time to tackle other pursuits.

A final impediment to social participation, mentioned earlier, appeared to be unexpected transitions, such as health crises and bereavements. These could leave participants physically or emotionally incapable of maintaining commitments. Locke et al. (2003) have talked about the base provided by a stable and settled personal life in maintaining sustained participation.

### The NCDS-identified non-participants

Individuals identified as non-participants in the NCDS data did not present in their qualitative interviews as particularly insular or socially isolated people. Instead, in many instances, they presented stories of past or occasional involvement in groups, communities, organisations and social activities. Notably, their participation was unlikely to encompass formal or informal volunteering. Instead, it tended to be orientated around attendance at evening classes and exercise classes, the membership of gyms, social clubs and sports clubs, and donating to charity. Involvement in such activities suggests that many of these individuals could be identified as ‘passive participants’ as defined by Harrison and Singer (2007). Passive participants engage in some “easy” activities such as socialising with neighbours, visiting local leisure facilities and participating in local school activities (Harrison and Singer, 2007: 56). As a group, they are disproportionately middle income and middle-aged while there is a pronounced bias towards parents (Harrison and Singer, 2007: 56). In a number of instances, participation was a case of ‘joining in together’ as individuals joined a group or activity in conjunction with a friend or family member. Life events which sat in tension with this type of joining in could disrupt or even end an individual's participation activities. Where instances of volunteering occurred, the NCDS-identified non-participants tended to be involved in an organisation or activity linked to their child. Differing from the frequent participants, their involvement ended when their child's participation in the group or activity ceased. This points to the role of changing personal circumstances, in this case the arrival of children and children growing up and taking on new activities, in an individual's participation pathway.

The NCDS-identified non-participants, as a group, offered little commentary on why they participated or the benefits, if any, they derived from participating. This made it difficult to compare their perceptions and experiences with those of the perennials and frequents who, as groups, tended to provide more expansive and reflective answers. Where motives were discussed by the non-participants, they often seemed functional in nature with self-interest or personal gain appearing to prompt involvement. Daniel's (Box 7) interview provided several examples of this orientation. He set up and then ran a leaseholders' right to manage company in order to save money noting, "*we could either pay a lot more each year and somebody would run it for us [...] some businessman would run it for us, or run it ourselves*". He campaigned against the opening of a local bail hostel because he was concerned about the potential threats to the safety and wellbeing of his children. Lastly, his son "*was never any good at football, but always wanted to play,*" so he organised a football team for the children in his village which, he noted, gave them "*something to do*". In this last example, the motive seemed to be a combination of self-interest (addressing his child's interest) and altruism (providing an activity for local children). Generally, altruistic motives were uncommon, although this may have been a function of the kind of activities and organisations the NCDS-identified non-participants joined.

Box 7 Daniel: past formal and informal volunteer

Daniel was separated from his wife and lived with a new partner in a new area. He had two grown up children from his marriage. He repeatedly mentioned a "*mid-life crisis*" in his qualitative interview, but this masked rather complicated personal circumstances. He had been seeing, and continued to see, a counsellor. He was employed in a senior managerial role which involved working long hours. His weekends were filled with activities and pastimes including watching the local rugby team with friends. He had a history of participating in various groups and activities. He played football for a local team, set up and then ran a youth football team, organised and managed a leaseholders 'right to manage company' and was actively involved in a campaign against the creation and operation of a local bail hostel. Through work, he became involved in charity fundraising activities, acting as a marshal on charity walks. Despite this catalogue of past involvements, Daniel claimed that he disliked being "*tied*" into formally organised groups noting: "*I don't feel I need to belong to organisations*". He also felt that he had not been in his current community long enough to have developed the connections to local groups that facilitate participation.

For a minority of the NCDS-identified non-participants (seven), the qualitative interviews revealed the originally-anticipated stories of non-participation. These individuals reported taking no part in clubs, groups and associations, they did not volunteer and did not engage in various 'social' activities, such as charitable-giving, or attending evening classes. These individuals would seem to be readily identifiable as 'inactives' – a concept employed by Pattie et al. (2004) to describe individuals who engage in little or no participation and volunteering activity. Lack of time, owing to work and/or family commitments, and/or lack of interest, tended to be the reasons given by these individuals for their lack of involvement (see Donald, Box 8).

Box 8 Donald: time-pressed, family-focused non-participant

Donald was married with two adult daughters. He had recently become self-employed setting up a business after taking voluntary redundancy. He worked very long hours waking at 4.30 am to start work at 5 am and spent some time every day at his business (it was open seven days a week). He felt that he had a very poor work/life balance, far worse than he had in his previous job, but he could not “*see an easy way to get out*”. This punishing work/life balance was identified as *the* barrier to his participating in activities and groups: “*I just feel that the number of hours that I spend at work nowadays just to try and continue to keep the roof over your head is enough. Quite frankly [laughs]*”. Donald formed an interesting contrast to the couple of self-employed frequent participants who appeared able to structure their working patterns to support volunteering and participation. Donald had participated as a child and teenager, playing football and table tennis, and had been a member of the Boys' Brigade. He strongly regretted leaving his previous job, commenting on the financial impact and loss of “*kudos*” that he has since experienced. His focus was on keeping “*the family unit together*” under new, more challenging financial circumstances. He felt that, consequently, he had become more “*insular*”. Any free time he had, he tended to spend with family. His father had died a few years ago and this had affected him deeply: “*I was basically just sad for a long period of time*”. Since this bereavement, his family had become increasingly important: “*they've become much more central to what happens in my life*”.

Across the 21 NCDS-identified non-participants, lack of time owing to long working hours, a long commute, working unsociable hours and/or shift work, was *the* most frequently cited reason for low or no involvement in organisations, activities and volunteering. This is interesting because, relative to the perennials, the non-participants did not appear to be any more likely to be in full-time employment (as indicated by their NCDS data records). Perhaps the social acceptability of 'lack of time' as an explanation for non-participation, rather than

any 'real' lack of time, explained its ready use by these individuals. The apparent tension between explanations and circumstances might, though, have also been due to some non-participants lacking any real knowledge of participating and volunteering. This might have made answering questions about these subjects difficult and potentially embarrassing and encouraged recourse to a narrative that sought to explain or rationalise non-participation through reference to socially acceptable 'excuses'. Other factors identified as barriers to participation, or reasons for not participating, included family commitments, a preference for spending time at home rather than 'going out', an aversion to being 'tied' into a formal group, and physical and mental health problems, which some individuals linked to the aging process – several of these factors seemed to explain Cathy's (Box 9) non-participation. Wider and changing personal circumstances provided important explanations, then, for people's participation pathways and behaviour.

#### Box 9 Cathy: family-focused, past club member

Cathy was married with three adult children, two of whom had recently returned to the family home. She worked part-time from home in an accountancy role. She had a network of close family and friends who lived nearby and with whom she socialised. She visited or spoke to her elderly father every day and was extremely involved in caring for her two young grandchildren. She spent some time with them almost every day. She described herself as family orientated and felt that the emphasis her parents placed on family explained the emphasis she placed on it. Cathy and her husband did things together; they did not pursue separate interests. Indeed, she encouraged her husband to give up volunteering at the Scouts because it was impacting on "*family time*". When explaining her lack of involvement in clubs and associations, Cathy noted that she was not the "*type of person*" who likes to "*go out*" and get involved. This seemed to be connected to a past health crisis. Around 15 years ago, she suffered from depression and experienced panic attacks which, at one stage had prevented her from leaving the house. She had feared that her depression would return when her mother died several years ago, but, fortunately, it had not. She was very close to her mother and identified this bereavement as a major turning point in her life.

## Conclusions

This mixed methods study has drawn together longitudinal quantitative data from the NCDS and contemporary qualitative data from the associated SPIS to interrogate three categories of participation originally identified in NCDS data records – frequent participants, perennial participants and non-participants. Frequent participants had, in the most recently completed wave of the NCDS, indicated that they volunteered at least once a week, or joined in with the

activities of at least three organisations in a typical week. Perennial participants reported, in every wave of the NCDS, that they 'joined in' with at least one group and/or activity mentioned within the NCDS interview. Finally, non-participants indicated, in every wave of the NCDS, that they did not volunteer and took no part in the full range of social activities and groups mentioned within the NCDS interview.

The study, by combining different datasets, has demonstrated how different methods can identify, amongst the same collection of individuals, relatively and sometimes noticeably different stories of participation and volunteering. In so doing, it has underlined the role that methods play in structuring the level and type of participation and volunteering identified in research. For example, individuals identified in the NCDS as non-participants often emerged in the SPIS as low, occasional and past participants. While the NCDS data indicated relatively widespread trade union and political activity amongst the sample of 50 at 50, this behaviour was rarely mentioned in the SPIS qualitative interviews. Individuals often presented a higher number of organisational attachments in the SPIS data than they did in the NCDS data.

Several factors might explain why seemingly incompatible accounts of participation emerged. To focus on just a couple, first, volunteering and participation are not value-free activities and so, to present a socially desirable image, some individuals might have over-claimed when discussing these activities in the face-to-face SPIS interviews. Similarly, the wish to provide socially acceptable responses/excuses might have encouraged individuals to present, in these interviews, lack of time as an explanation for no or low participation and volunteering. Second, owing to the phrasing and sequencing of questions in the NCDS, only respondents who indicated they were the members of an organisation were asked if they 'joined in' with an organisation's activities. The NCDS appears, then, to privilege participation which occurs within the embrace of membership of formal organisations, although this is not unexpected given that NCDS has been asking questions about participation since the 1970s. Forms of participation outside membership-based organisations can be missed, but then subsequently picked up in the SPIS interview. (Suspensions that the NCDS might fail to uncover all types of activity and participation in fact informed the design of the SPIS).

The study has highlighted the role of life stage and life events in participation and volunteering pathways. At times, life events, such as major health crises, bereavements and child care duties formed significant, sometimes unassailable, obstacles to participation and volunteering. However, life events have also proved to be triggers which prompt initial, continued or new forms of participation. The arrival of children, and children growing up and taking on new activities, have, for instance, been shown to prompt individuals to participate in groups and activities linked to their child. Besides life events, structural aids and barriers to

participation such as employment factors, including changing working patterns and shift work, have been identified.

Personal benefits and fulfilments have been presented as key motivations for participation amongst the most intensively-committed individuals, and have been seen to accelerate involvement. The most consistently-involved participants have been shown to be the most likely to draw upon altruistic explanations for getting and staying involved. By contrast, the NCDS-identified non-participants appeared to be the most likely to present functional personal benefit explanations for involvement.

### **Policy implications**

The 50 at 50 study found that personal invitations were particularly effective recruitment tools when examining how and/or why individuals joined organisations and activities. Policy makers and voluntary and community groups could explore opportunities to develop personal outreach and networking programmes to reach people whose skillsets may be highly matched to organisational needs (there is a potential risk, though, that such an approach might limit diversity within an organisation). Individuals could also be identified as advocates or champions to promote the organisation or activity to potential recruits.

Personal benefits and fulfilment repeatedly emerged as a key motivating force in social participation, and as an aspect which propelled individuals into greater degrees of involvement and/or encouraged their continued involvement. Not only does this suggest volunteering and participation could be beneficial for individuals, a finding which helps justify pro-volunteering policy, it also suggests that there could be significant scope for policy makers and community and voluntary groups to develop positive publicity campaigns that articulate the personal benefits and rewards of participation and volunteering.

It cannot be assumed that people will be equally well informed about participation and volunteering. There can be ambiguity amongst some about what such activities entail, and how they can be accessed. Policy makers and community and voluntary organisations could explore opportunities to build knowledge about participation and volunteering through information and publicity campaigns.

Community and voluntary groups need to recognise the diversity of people's working and family lives and explore the potential to provide participation and volunteering opportunities that fit around competing time commitments and which adapt to an individual's changing personal circumstances. The scope to provide opportunities outside traditional hours, on a virtual basis, and on an ad-hoc/flexible basis should be explored.

Certain life events have the capacity to disrupt participation and volunteering. Using longitudinal data to understand the impact of transitions on participation could be useful background for policy makers wishing to identify events that might stall participation.

Community and voluntary groups could investigate ways of supporting current and former participants or volunteers through those transitions which are associated with or result in individuals suspending their involvements. Groups should also provide an open-door to enable a return in the future.

### **Future areas of research**

The 50 at 50 study, adopted a sampling approach that focused on individuals exhibiting somewhat 'extreme' participation patterns in the NCDS data. Future research could focus on individuals located elsewhere on the participation spectrum. This exercise would provide useful insights into the type of participation barriers, triggers and aids that individuals following less unusual participation pathways encounter.

Individuals identified as non-participants within the NCDS data often emerged in the SPIS data as low, ad-hoc or past participants. This perhaps indicates that some survey instruments struggle to register these degrees of involvement. The noticeable variation within this group of 'non-participants', plus the variety of factors that appeared to facilitate or impede their participation, suggests that future research could, usefully, focus exclusively on these kinds of participant. (It is appreciated that it can be difficult to locate, and then recruit to studies, such individuals.)

Working patterns emerged as a strong influence on participation patterns. Future research could usefully focus on occupational and sectoral distinctions to investigate how these are enabling or disabling participation, as well, perhaps, as the scope and uptake of trade union activity across the workforce.

## Appendix 1

### Sample 50 at 50

#### NCDS-identified frequent participants

Pseudonym	Unique participant ID (P No.)	Gender
Linda	P039	Female
John	P1090	Male
David	P1268	Male
James	P140	Male
Mary	P159	Female
Fiona	P178	Female
Graham	P217	Male
Isobel	P562	Female

#### NCDS-identified perennial participants

Pseudonym	Unique participant ID (P No.)	Gender
Susan	P031	Female
Alice	P050	Female
Michael	P067	Male
Gwen	P1153	Female
Rhian	P1277	Female
Howell	P1316	Male
Andrew	P234	Male
Lorna	P247	Female
Sarah	P306	Female
Anna	P312	Female
Eileen	P402	Female
Iona	P485	Female
Iain	P609	Male
Louise	P696	Female
Sally	P745	Female
Joseph	P750	Male
Sian	P791	Female
Catrin	P817	Female
Mair	P862	Female
Anwen	P863	Female

### NCDS-identified non-participants

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Unique participant ID (P No.)</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Daniel	P010	Male
Cathy	P100	Female
Bethan	P1301	Female
Charlotte	P148	Female
William	P149	Male
Moira	P224	Female
Karen	P356	Female
Carol	P393	Female
George	P423	Male
Paul	P433	Male
Robert	P440	Male
Donald	P487	Male
Bonnie	P498	Female
Alison	P527	Female
Janet	P549	Female
Donna	P684	Female
Helen	P732	Female
Steve	P736	Male
Morgan	P763	Female
Nerys	P835	Female
Dilys	P884	Female

### NCDS-identified unemployed individual

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Unique participant ID (P No.)</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Ruth	P320	Female

## Appendix 2

### Membership and joining in questions from the NCDS

The following questions explored joining in and membership in the most recent data collection wave of the NCDS. They are not exactly as presented within the NCDS dataset. Coding jargon and certain instructions to the interviewer have been removed.

Have you ever been a member of any of the kinds of organisations listed below?

- Political party
- Trade union
- Environmental group
- Parents'/school association
- Tenants'/residents' group or Neighbourhood Watch
- Religious group or church organisation
- Voluntary service group
- Other community or civic group
- Social club/ working men's club
- Sports club
- Women's Institute/ Townswomen's Guild
- Women's group/ feminist organisation
- Professional organisation
- Pensioners' group/ organisation
- Scouts/Guides organisation
- Any other organisation
- None

***IF** the interviewee has been the member of an organisation, ask the following:*

And are you currently a member of any of the organisations shown below?

- Political party
- Trade union
- Environmental group
- Parents'/school association
- Tenants'/residents' group or Neighbourhood Watch

- Religious group or church organisation
- Voluntary service group
- Other community or civic group
- Social club/ working men's club
- Sports club
- Women's Institute/ Townswomen's Guild
- Women's group/ feminist organisation
- Professional organisation
- Pensioners' group/ organisation
- Scouts/Guides organisation
- Any other organisation
- None

*For **each** of the organisations mentioned by the interviewee, ask the following:*

How often do you take part in the activities of the organisation?

- At least once a week
- About once a month
- Less often than once a month
- Never

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## About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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## Quantitative Analysis

This research stream is designed to improve our understanding of the third sector through a large-scale programme of quantitative work. It is designed to help us better explain the distribution of third sector organisations, analyse their contribution to society and the economy and understand their dynamics. We are interested in data not just on third sector organisations and their resources, but also on both financial inputs to the sector (funding flows from various sources) and human inputs (e.g. the paid workforce and volunteers).

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