

# ESRC

ESRC Seminar Series

Mapping the public policy landscape

Individual pathways in participation





## Foreword

Recent years have seen growing public policy concern about participation, with a strong focus on fostering co-operation and involvement between community groups and users of public services and those responsible for providing them.

Crucial in all this is an understanding of the hows and whys or 'pathways' any one of us takes to and from getting involved.

That is where this booklet aims to make a contribution – examining, among other things, whether doing voluntary and community work can spur people to participate in civic and public service activity.

It is based largely on presentations by John Annette, Professor of Citizenship and Lifelong Learning at Birkbeck, University of London, and Dr Stella Creasy, Head of Research at Involve, the not-for-profit organisation dedicated to understanding and promoting better civic participation.

They led the third in a series of seminars entitled 'Engaging Citizens', organised by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in collaboration with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO).

These events provide an opportunity for practitioners, academics and policymakers to shed new light on how people are helping build a society that is both inclusive and cohesive, and identify ways in which they are making positive differences in their communities.

The earlier seminars examined faith-based voluntary action, and how information and communications technology impacts on social capital. Others will focus on whether existing community participation in local governance has improved public services, and the impacts of globalisation and the Human Rights Act on all this.

Individual pathways in participation is just the latest topic to be looked at in the ESRC's Public Policy Seminar Series, in which we present independent research in key policy areas to potential users in Government, politics, the media, and the private and voluntary sectors. We see such events as an opportunity to establish further dialogue with the users of our research, and we welcome any subsequent contact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Diamond', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Ian Diamond  
Chief Executive  
Economic and Social Research Council



## Individual pathways in participation

### The Researchers

**JOHN ANNETTE** BA MA PhD is Professor of Citizenship and Lifelong Learning, Dean of the Faculty of Continuing Education, and Pro Vice Master, Birkbeck College, University of London.

Currently, he is researching and publishing in the areas of citizenship education in schools and for lifelong learning, community-based learning and community partnerships in higher education, and on community leadership and involvement in community development and local governance.

For many years, he has been active in working in partnership with local communities in North London and facilitating capacity building for community involvement.

Professor Annette is an advisor to the Department for Education and Skills on youth volunteering, the Department of Constitutional Affairs on citizenship programmes, and the Civil Renewal Unit of the Home Office (now DCLG) on capacity building for citizenship and community development. He is on the Executive of the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) and Chair of the 'Higher Education Community Partnership' national network.

He was involved in the IPPR commission on public involvement in the public services, which launched its report *The Lonely Citizen* in June 2004. Finally, he is an adviser to the London Civic Forum, which supports the Greater London Authority and the Mayor, and currently a member of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering.

**DR STELLA CREASY** is Head of Research and Development at Involve, a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to understanding and promoting better civic participation. A former local councillor in East London and an adviser to Douglas Alexander MP, her doctorate on *Understanding the Lifeworld of Social Exclusion* was awarded the 2005/6 London School of Economics Richard Titmuss Prize.

Specialising in the social psychology of public participation, Dr Creasy has written extensively on how to increase public involvement in a range of organisations. She is also active within her own local area as a school governor and member of several community action groups.

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

There have been various studies into motivation for voluntary action and participation but, perhaps surprisingly, fewer about 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.

This booklet attempts to shed more light on this subject by looking at people's pathways to and from participation. It explores whether being involved in community activities – as a volunteer, member or beneficiary – can lead individuals to take part in decision-making structures and processes within the voluntary and community organisations as well as others including state institutions and public services.

The passage from one type of involvement is, of course, neither automatic nor compulsory, but we need to improve our understanding of the factors facilitating or hindering this possible movement.

So how connected or disconnected are people's experiences?

On the following pages we review recent developments and existing and current research, and examine the relationship, if any, between involvement in volunteering and community organisations and participation in the public realm.

Along the way, we gain insights into the attitudes of ordinary people in a community in North-East London. And we look at findings from research into lifelong stages of volunteering carried out in Canada, to see whether there are lessons for the UK in terms of any trends or patterns of engagement, and the effect of influences such as gender, educational level and religious belief.

## Key insights and implications

- Despite growing opportunities for participation through increased 'empowerment' in both national and local government, research suggests that people feel increasingly disconnected from the public realm.
- Increasing antagonism towards traditional democratic practices and institutions, whether in falling turnout, or trust in political structures and elected representatives, is shown in studies conducted for, among others, the Home Office.
- Professor John Annette warns that failure or reluctance to appreciate the 'political nature' of community leadership misses the opportunity to consider how involvement in neighbourhood renewal can give the opportunity for lifelong learning for active citizenship through partnership working.
- New Labour's programme for the modernisation of local government, and its neighbourhood renewal strategies, provide the opportunity for local people to get involved in local government and regeneration partnership boards. This is part of a shift from local government to local governance and such activities provide rich opportunities for non-formal lifelong learning for active citizenship.
- Such non-formal community based learning would benefit from being informed by the theory and practice of experiential learning as developed in the USA, and now growing internationally.
- The main challenge facing such developments is whether local political authorities are willing and able to move beyond a politics of consumer satisfaction and public consultation to more deliberative and participatory democratic politics.

- In line with other research, a snapshot by Dr Stella Creasy of attitudes in a North-East London community found that while a large degree of informal social networking and activism created substantial 'social capital' for residents, there was no automatic relationship between this and their engagement with the public realm.
- Rather, motivation for engagement appeared to be down to residents' perception that their locality was neglected by public service providers. So they needed to work together to overcome the difficulties posed by the negative impact of these services and the local authority.
- Dr Creasy argues for a shift in priorities in local and national governance, away from creating pathways to participation through structural reforms to its mechanisms, towards securing institutional cultures which can support community engagement and empowerment.
- She says that current trends challenge researchers to do more to understand the cultural and psychological perceptions that frame how the public view activism and the influence these have on participation in both civil and civic society.
- In Canadian research, Dr Paul Reed and Dr Kevin Selbee, found that a change was underway from the traditional pattern of participation rates being low at young ages, increasing during midlife, and then declining after about age 55.
- There had been a sharp increase in rates of volunteering among the under-25s, which changed the life cycle pattern, and rates of volunteering related to age were significantly affected by the main life cycle states, such as marital status, whether there were children in the home, and people's work situation.



## From volunteering to civil renewal to participative governance

John Annette considers the role of local political participation in 'an education for democracy'

The 19th Century philosopher JS Mill observed that local democratic government not only creates the opportunity for political participation, but also provides the basis for 'an education for citizenship'.

This is a concept based on a civic republican model of active or participatory citizenship rather than liberal individualist or communitarian ideas.

Much more recently, Professor Gerry Stoker, formerly of the University of Manchester, has written that 'local government should not be defined by its task of service delivery; rather it should be valued as a site for political activity'.

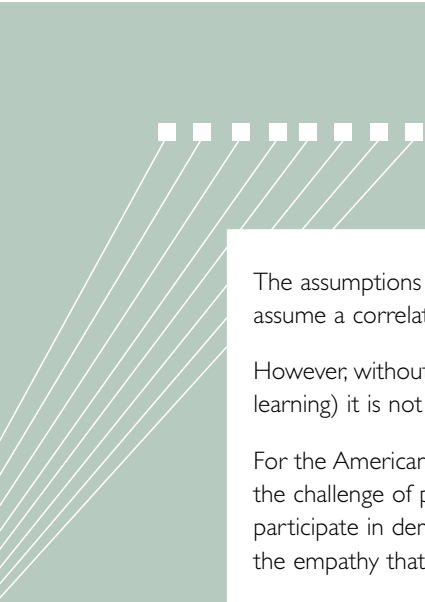
In the USA, a growing number of political scientists, such as Robert Putnam, are noting the decline of 'social capital', that reserve of goodwill generated by people's social interactions.

They point to a decrease in participation in public affairs and voluntary and community activity, and express growing concern about the vitality of civil society.

Evidence in the UK is complex. A recent study by Peter Hall, indicates that 'social capital' is still strong but that there is also a decline in public 'trust' – something confirmed by *Active Communities: Initial Findings from the 2001 and 2003 Home Office Citizenship Surveys*.

This report shows that people living in the most deprived areas of the UK are the least likely to volunteer formally. Yet, overall, it indicates that 'people engage with and participate in their communities in a substantial way'.





The assumptions of the 19th Century social theorist Alexis de Tocqueville, which underlie Putnam's analysis, assume a correlation between social capital and active citizenship.

However, without a learning framework for developing active citizenship (including non-formal and informal learning) it is not clear how social capital necessarily produces active citizenship.

For the American political theorist Dr Benjamin Barber, the fundamental problem facing civil society is that the challenge of providing citizens with 'the literacy required to live in a civil society, the competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to think critically and act deliberately in a pluralist world, the empathy that permits us to hear and thus accommodate others, all involve skills that must be acquired.'

### **Encouraging 'deliberative democracy' (consulting and involving)**

Enhancing political participation in local and regional governance through community leadership can make a contribution to the renewal of democracy in the UK and provide lifelong learning for active citizenship. The main challenge facing such developments is whether local political authorities are willing and able to move beyond a politics of consumer satisfaction and public consultation to a more deliberative and participatory democratic politics.

Lawrence Pratchett, of DeMontfort University, Leicester, has argued for 'a new democratic polity which not only improves the effectiveness of existing practices but also draws upon different components of direct, consultative, deliberative and representative democracy to create a new democratic order.'

This would include referendums, consultative activities, and 'deliberative participation'. There is an increasing interest in the activities of deliberative democracy which have been advocated by the Local Government Association and follow on from the work of the Commission for Local Democracy, 1993-1995, and the ESRC Local Governance Research Programme, 1992-1997.

More recently, the New Labour Government has developed its strategy for Civil Renewal, and this has informed the 'Together We Can' and 'Take Part' programmes.

The recent White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, provides a framework for future development of public participation and neighbourhood governance. Evidence indicates that local governance now includes a growing repertoire of approaches, which can encourage people to get involved.

Innovations in local democracy have included referendums, focus groups, citizens' juries, visioning, participatory budgeting and so on.

As Professor Pratchett notes, these activities in themselves cannot establish a more deliberative democracy, but as part of a wider reform package they can provide the basis for the realisation of such a deliberative form of democratic politics.

As local authorities establish 'local strategic partnerships' as part of the statutory obligation to involve the local communities in developing 'community strategies' and also for those areas which receive neighbourhood renewal funding, there are an enormous variety of innovative approaches with which they will operate.

This reflects a gradual shift from local government to governance, and includes participation of a range of social networks that can generate both social capital and active citizenship.

A growing number of research projects are examining these forms of deliberative democratic politics on both the local community level and on a wider comparative and national basis.

## What the research tells us

As part of the ESRC research programme on Democracy and Participation, projects by Lawrence Pratchett, Vivien Lowndes and Gerry Stoker at DeMontfort University, *The Locality Effect: Local Government and Citizen Participation*, and by Professor Marian Barnes, now at the University of Brighton, and others on *Power, Participation and Political Renewal*, provide important data on both the strengths and weaknesses of the new strategies for citizenship participation and a study of their impact on locality and community politics.

The Barnes study is interesting because it will also evaluate 'community development projects working both with locality and identity groups'.

Charles Pattie and Patrick Seyd, of the University of Sheffield, and Paul Whiteley, now at the University of Essex, have published their 'citizen's audit' which provides an up to date understanding of the changing forms of citizen participation. More recently, there have been the Power Inquiry and the work of Involve and others.

The Participation Industry is now a major international business.

In the UK, there are increasingly capacity building programmes for people in the voluntary and community sectors who participate in partnership working in Single Regeneration Budget Programmes and New Deal for Communities Programmes. There are also the 'Local Strategic Partnerships' for development of local authority 'community strategies', which in key areas of deprivation are linked to neighbourhood renewal programmes.

These programmes and the experiential learning involved in participating in regeneration activities offer an important opportunity for structuring non-formal lifelong learning for active citizenship.

The learning theory and practice of service learning, with its emphasis on 'reflective practice' and the development of active citizenship through experiential learning can be adapted to provide something that best meets the needs of adult learners who are actively involved in their communities.

In many of these cases, the interest in lifelong learning for active citizenship may be more with building social capital than with capacity building for democratic political participation.

There is increasing research into the relationship between volunteering and adult learning, including both the non-formal and informal learning outcomes of the experience of volunteering on adults.

There is evidence that volunteers are increasingly looking to gain knowledge and skills for employability through volunteering.

The types of learning that occur in volunteer settings cross the range of adult learning.

At the core of this development is recognition of reflective learning, which is based on the principles of experiential learning. In 1995, Konrad Elsdon found that many volunteer activities produce learning outcomes that involve personal growth, self-confidence and a range of key skills and capabilities. While this research represents an important beginning, it does not address the question of whether volunteer activity promotes not only bonding and bridging social capital but also active citizenship.

There is also growing research by academics involved in lifelong learning into why and how adults come to be engaged in local volunteering and civic engagement activities, including by Pam Coare and Rennie Johnston, at the University of Leicester; and the Education and Training for Governance and Active Citizenship in Europe project, based at the University of Surrey [www.surrey.ac.uk/politics/ETGACE](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/politics/ETGACE)

In a study based in South London, involving a range of stakeholders involved in regeneration partnerships, Jean Anastacio and Marjorie Mayo identified three main views of capacity building for partnership working – capacity for effective consultation, for effective community representation and, finally, for community empowerment.

The majority of participants regarded capacity building for the representative role as the major need for community leaders. This capacity, although critical of the relationships of power involved in partnership working, nevertheless accepted and worked within established structures and processes of change.

Another study by Paul Henderson and Marjorie Mayo, in 1998, in partnership with the Community Development Foundation, for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, involved a national review of training and education in urban regeneration.

It indicated that there was a need for capacity building not only for community representatives but also for professionals (usually local government officers) involved in regeneration partnership boards.

Participants indicated a preference for experiential learning or action-based research learning over formal training.

This emphasis on the importance of informal learning for social action highlights the question of how non-formal learning opportunities for participation in partnership working might be provided. Again, I would argue that the pedagogy of service learning provides a useful model for the establishment of such learning opportunities, which might be accredited and could lead to qualifications in community work or community leadership.

Marjorie Mayo points out that such experiential learning might be based on negative experiences of partnership working and might result in political alienation and not active citizenship. With Paul Henderson, in 1998, she argued for establishment of a national framework for lifelong learning for active citizenship, which would be through participation in community development and community. Such a framework would provide greater social inclusion and opportunities for accreditation and personal development. It would also allow for much greater research to be undertaken into curriculum development and experiential learning opportunities needed for effective partnership working and community leadership.



## Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy Action Plan

January 2001 saw publication of *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal: National Strategy Action Plan*.

It called for establishment of 'Local Strategic Partnerships', which would provide more effective local co-ordination and encourage community empowerment. There would be regional support provided by Government offices for the regions, and national support provided by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

The Local Strategic Partnerships would ensure that local residents and voluntary and community sector organisations would be involved in developing local neighbourhood renewal strategies supported by funding from Community Chests and a larger Community Empowerment Fund.

Jane Thompson notes perceptively that, '...the case for adult and community-based learning still has to be made. Its claim to relevance and its presumptions about engagement with local people will be sorely tested. Adult and community learning could be at the heart of neighbourhood renewal but will need to be very clear about what it has to offer residents and activists who want to get involved in turning around their lives and their communities in ways that just might make a difference.'

While it is now an established principle in regeneration programmes, that local people should be involved in partnership working, it is not clear to what extent they will be able to shape a local or regional learning and development strategy for neighbourhood renewal.

The role of the voluntary and community sectors in learning partnerships linked to the Learning and Skills Councils is uneven across the country. According to *Regional Action West Midlands* in 2002, for example:

*'Engagement with the learning agenda is not unproblematic for the voluntary and community sector; involvement partnership activity can be perceived as an unequal relationship in which the voluntary and community organisations give access and legitimacy but gain little in return.'*

## Neighbourhood Renewal Skills and Knowledge Programme

In 2001, the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit published its *Neighbourhood Renewal Skills and Knowledge Programme* for consultation, and the following year *The Learning Curve – a learning and development strategy for neighbourhood renewal*.

This 23-point action plan provides for all those involved in neighbourhood renewal activities, including 'residents', 'regeneration practitioners', 'professionals' and 'organisations'.

The report stresses the need for evidence-based policy and practice, and development of accessible knowledge management systems concerning regeneration practice. It outlines impressively the knowledge and skills required by all participants for effective working in neighbourhood renewal partnerships. The strategy is sophisticated in that it notes the formal, non-formal and informal learning involved in neighbourhood renewal activities. Recognition of the importance of the non-formal learning opportunities through action learning or experiential learning is to be welcomed but it does not specify in any details how this might be achieved. As I have argued previously, the pedagogy of service learning can be applied to the learning involved in participating in partnership working and being involved in community leadership.

It refers to 'leadership skills' necessary for community leadership, but not to any 'political' awareness or skills necessary for effective and equitable partnership working. The learning agenda is about individuals and organisations and their capacity to work in partnership in order to tackle the priority areas of neighbourhood renewal. The document also does not refer to 'citizenship' as a category which entails both rights and responsibilities, nor to the problem of the competing claims for 'community leadership' between local councillors and representatives from residents' associations, voluntary and community sector organisations. (It does however recognise the importance of capacity building for local councillors and local government officers working in regeneration).

Its frame of reference for 'urban regeneration' is that of urban geography and the study of the built environment, which does not fully enough recognise the political context within which neighbourhood renewal activities take place.

This failure or reluctance to appreciate the 'political nature' of community leadership underlies the fact that it also misses the opportunity to consider how involvement in neighbourhood renewal can include the opportunity to provide a lifelong learning for active citizenship through partnership working and community leadership.

### **In conclusion**

The New Labour Government's programme for modernisation of local government, and its neighbourhood renewal strategies, provide the opportunity for local people to get involved in local government and regeneration partnership boards.

This is part of a shift from local government to local governance and such activities provide rich opportunities for non-formal lifelong learning for active citizenship. This non-formal community based learning would benefit from being informed by the theory and practice of experiential learning as developed in the USA and now growing internationally.

Research into the working of the community leadership involved in New Deal for Communities elected boards, Community Empowerment Networks and now 'Local Strategic Partnerships', including my own, forthcoming work, highlights the need for capacity building programmes for active citizenship and community leadership.

This research also recognises the importance of the political context within which these activities take place.

The opportunity for a lifelong learning for active citizenship through participation in local governance and regeneration partnership working provides for the possible development of a 'civic republican' or 'participatory democratic' conception of citizenship.



## I, you, we, them?

Stella Creasy examines the psychology of participation in the public realm

If we want to know what makes people active either within their communities or in the public realm, we need to focus not necessarily on *how* they participate but *why*.

This requires greater understanding of the way in which perceptions of participation are created, maintained and shared by individuals and groups, and the pathways or barriers to participation which these perceptions can create.

As has been said, interest in this area occurs against a backdrop of public policy concern to empower citizens to participate in civil and civic society.

This is not a new phenomenon. In the course of the past ten years we have seen an increase in opportunities for participation, and recognition that involving citizens in decisions about service provision is critical to ensuring that these are able to meet the needs of a diverse population.

Most recently, this has been evident in moves to encourage greater co-operation with community activists and co-production of services with consumers in the forthcoming local government legislation.

In its work, Involve identifies these opportunities as *de facto* empowerment; these processes offer citizens different amounts of actual power or influence over decision-making.

Yet whilst there have been many more opportunities for participation through increased *de facto* empowerment in both national and local government, the evidence suggests that people feel increasingly disconnected from the public realm and, as a consequence, are choosing not to participate in political decision-making.



Here Involve's work has identified a lack of 'subjective' empowerment to match the *de facto* opportunities presented by the Government. Put simply, many people do not feel that they can exercise influence over decision-making or are unaware of the opportunities they have. As a result, they do not take them up, and so do not participate in the public realm.

Recent research reveals an increasing antagonism towards traditional democratic practices and institutions, whether in falling turnout, or trust in political structures and elected representatives.

**Table 1: If voting meant anything**

- 40 per cent of people haven't voted at all in the past two years.
- In 2005, more people voted *against* rather than for a party.
- 17 per cent of people 'don't want a say' in how the country is run.
- Only 43 per cent of people trust the Government; only 16 per cent trust political parties.
- European evidence shows trust in politicians is critical to participation – rather than the actual power of institutions.\*

*Involve, 2006*

Most people are in favour of increasing opportunities for participation through measures such as neighbourhood forums, but the evidence shows that few actually take part. And those who **do** are from a similar socio-economic background. Crucially, these are the people most likely to have a high level of subjective empowerment; they believe that they can or should be able to influence decision-making, and so take up the opportunities presented to them.

**Table 2: Intention versus action**

On the one hand...

- 82 per cent of people support 'community involvement' in public services.
- 79 per cent of people say their local authority should find out more about their views.
- 20 per cent want more say in what their council does.

But...

- Only 26 per cent of people would like to be involved themselves.
- Only two per cent of people actually participate.
- 58 per cent of people say they would like to know what their council is doing, but would be happy for it just to get on with its job.

*Involve, 2006*

As *de facto* empowerment opportunities increase in British society, there is a growing 'participation gap' with fewer people taking an active part in the public realm, whilst those who do are less and less representative of the population as a whole.

This has serious implications for the legitimacy of public decision-making processes and the capacity of public services to meet the needs of those with whom they do not have a relationship. Without a better understanding of what makes people participate, it is likely that any further activity to increase *de facto* opportunities for influence will not lead to empowerment of a wider section of the population but, rather, increasing opportunities for certain sections to exercise ever greater power over the public realm. Put starkly, people who do not feel able to influence things tend not to sign petitions, get involved with opt-in participative forums, or make use of choice mechanisms – no matter how innovative they may be.

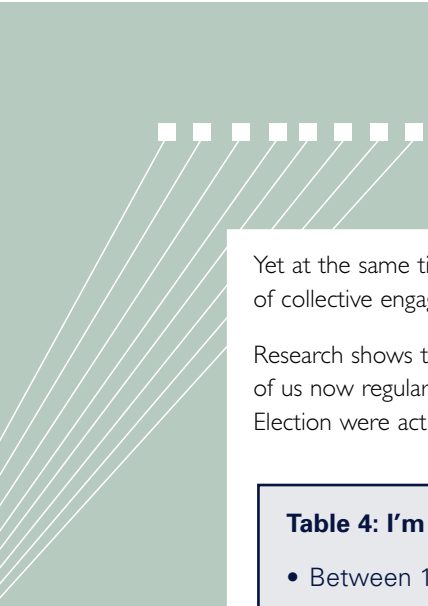
### Table 3: Social exclusion in action?

- 70 per cent of those in social class AB voted in 2005, as against 54 per cent of those in social class DE.
- 51 per cent of the top social class feel they can influence decisions at a local level, compared with just 33 per cent of the lowest social class.
- Those in favour of public participation are much more likely to be in social classes AB and C1.

It is not just a question of income – those who participate in public service decision-making also tend to be over 35 years old, white and male.

*Involve, 2006*





Yet at the same time, the British are turning their attention increasingly to social activism and forms of collective engagement that operate outside the traditional structures of civic society.

Research shows that participation in social activism has been increasing in the UK, and that nearly a third of us now regularly volunteer. Perhaps most strikingly, many of those who did not vote in the last General Election were active in their local communities.

**Table 4: I'm not political but...**

- Between 1981 and 2002, membership of Greenpeace grew from 30,000 to 221,000.
- Between 1971 and 2002, Friends of the Earth grew from 1,000 members to 119,000.
- Nearly 30 per cent of Britons participate in voluntary activities once a month, giving nearly 12 hours of their time.
- 35 per cent of those people were members of campaigns or community action groups.
- 37 per cent of non-voters are members of campaigns or community action groups.
- 250,000 people marched for Make Poverty History, and eight million bought the wristbands.

*Involve, 2006*

This increasing civil participation and the 'participation gap' in the public realm challenge presumptions that involvement in social activism automatically leads individuals and communities to political engagement because this campaigning helps them to see a link between their community concerns and the decisions made by political institutions.

Instead, recent citizenship research has revealed some of the reasons why people **do** choose to participate either in social or political activism. If we examine the political and public policy evidence and analysis, we find five different factors driving disengagement, which appear to transcend forms of governance or governments themselves:

- a growing desire for 'self-authorship' amongst the public
- the collapse of deference towards political institutions and politicians
- time constraints
- demographic trends
- the role of the media.

It is important to recognise each of these trends is not distinct. Indeed, often they interact with each other to create barriers to participation. Importantly, these factors appear disproportionately to affect involvement in the public realm. Analysing these, it is clear that they reflect practical concerns – for example, difficulties in balancing work and family commitments with the requirements of civic life – but also a broader set of challenges that can be considered cultural or psychological barriers to particular forms of participation. Thus, in understanding public participation it is useful to analyse how, why and when such cultural and psychological factors are created or challenged, and how these can act as either a barrier or an incentive to activity within the social or the public realm.

## Evidence from North East London

In 2003, I conducted psychological fieldwork in Haringey, North East London, to examine how cultural and psychological factors may work at a local level.

The research revealed a stock of shared thoughts among both residents and those working in the area, which enabled them to create a 'common sense' of everyday life in the locality. These 'representations' were then used as a mental framework with which to understand and interact with others on the estate, public services and public realm institutions in the area.

### Table 5: The power of gossip

- **Lemon 6:** "I've never really been on to Haringey Council. I've heard a lot of people complaining that the repairs don't come quick enough, or waiting for moves and they take too long."
- **Rose 1:** "Some of the schools still tend to get a bad reputation – then they get better, and then they seem to get bad again."
- **Tan 1:** "A lot of people have complained about it (the hospital). They've treated us differently, especially having babies."

*Involve, 2006*

This 'common sense' reveals the power of gossip as a way of sharing information and ideas which then lead to expectations, perceptions and actions; over half the residents interviewed described regular communicative contact with neighbours and 47 out of the 70 respondents were explicit that their knowledge of life in the area was determined by what they learned from their neighbours.

### Table 6: Shared space, shared mind?

- **Jade 1:** "It's all very close. All the kids play out here in the afternoons... we stand out here nattering. I'm like an old woman sometimes!"
- **Red 3:** "I get stopped on the street – 'did you hear about so and so?'"
- **Red 1:** "People are always saying it's getting terrible around here."
- **Gatekeeper 1:** "Walking around... speaking to people, and the more you speak to people the more they get used to speaking to you – all very useful."

*Involve, 2006*

Yet it would be a mistake to presume that everyone in the area was of one mind. Whilst this framework was shared, how each resident chose to interpret its contents was different, depending on their own personal circumstances and identity. The 'common sense' created the backdrop to their lives, offering a range of ideas, images and identities with which to decide not only their attitudes and actions towards each other, but also their outlook on the local authority, public institutions and attempts to regenerate the estate.

As such this 'common sense' was also a critical source of information for understanding their approach to participation in both civil and civic society.

Analysis revealed that residents shared a strong perception that the local authority was neglecting them, and so not worthy of their support or interaction. In common with the broader social trends analysis, many of the ways in which the residents described their views of politics, political institutions and public service echoed the themes mentioned earlier. As a consequence, the neighbourhood forums were sparsely attended, and there was low voter turnout, low intent to vote and high levels of distrust and hostility towards politicians and public officials.

Particularly noticeable was the strong aggression towards political activism expressed by many of those who were very socially active, and the determination of many residents that this sense of neglect meant they should not participate in forums dedicated to changing the area, but instead change their lives by leaving it.

#### **Table 7: Talking politics and the public realm**

- **Mauve 2:** "Its like everything else. You go to a council meeting and you may as well be sitting at home."
- **Amber 4:** "The council don't give a damn. They are like the Government – they are the same – bunch of crooks, they take your money and they don't do nothing."
- **Lemon 4:** "I thought about it, then I thought its just lip service and I haven't bothered... I'm very negative about these organisations, that they are actually going to do anything. Like the politicians... I haven't got any evidence, so I haven't anything to judge it on, but this is my feeling."

*Involve, 2006*



Yet in contrast to some social capital theorists, this lack of activity within the public realm and political disengagement did not mean that residents were also socially isolated. Whilst they did not participate in formal social organisations, the research revealed a lot of informal social networking and activism that created substantial 'social capital' for the residents.

#### **Table 8: Informal social capital**

- **Red 1:** "The people who live next door take my daughter to school for me. If we need a pint of milk, a fiver quickly, or if someone needs a lift. She was sick. Just being there for each other. We all help each other."
- **Purple 1:** "We've got a fairly strong network that look out for each other, and you know the other one won't let you down if you need it."
- **Lemon 1:** "I did think about starting a Neighbourhood Watch. It's a bit 'Dot Cotton', but we needed it. People were breaking into cars."

*Involve, 2006*

Despite this strong civil engagement, there was little appetite for interaction with the public realm. Indeed, it appeared for many residents the motivations for civil engagement were down to the residents' perception that they needed to work together to oppose the negative impact on their lives of public services and the local authority. Many of those who were the most critical of political participation were also the most engaged in social and community activism.

### Table 9: Social activist, political interest?

- **Jade 1:** "I'm more of a pub voter. I sit in the pub and sort of talk up Labour or talk up the Conservatives, however I'm feeling at the moment, whatever paper I've been reading, and when it comes to the tick on the paper, I don't really do it. I have strong values when it comes to a debate, but when it comes to making a difference I don't."
- **Rose 1:** "I haven't in the last one because a) nobody has bothered to come round. We don't get any literature about the elections and the people that are standing and b) it doesn't seem to matter who you vote for, they do what they want. It's all for them."
- **Gold 1:** "I don't think I shall bother anymore because I don't care who's in, they are all the same under the brush. I don't think so, not now anyway."

*Involve, 2006*

This illustrates how there is no automatic connection between social activism and political engagement. Indeed, whilst there was a high level of social interaction on the estate and concern about the physical, social and environmental conditions of the area, this did not translate into participation in formal neighbourhood governance structures. During the six months of the study, attendance by residents at neighbourhood forums was 13, 11 and seven respectively, out of a potential 9,000.

The Haringey study illustrates how the perceptions individuals and communities hold of the role of participation in their lives are critical to their life chances. The 'common sense' of the residents informed their approach and action on a range of issues including the relevance and role of differing forms of civil and civic engagement in their lives.

This 'common sense' was a product of their social, economic and physical environments, and in turn they helped create, alter and sustain its contents. For those concerned with pathways to participation, this research points towards the importance of understanding not only the opportunities to participate offered to the public, but also how they perceive them in explaining engagement in the public realm. Perhaps most critically for contemporary concerns about democratic disengagement, this research suggests that rather than there being a relationship between social forms of activism and engagement in the public realm, the reverse may be true for today's Britons.

### In conclusion

Incorporating a psychological perspective on participation in the public realm highlights the need to match the increasing opportunities for participation presented by the civil renewal agenda with a vibrant civic culture – within both the institutions of governance and the wider community. As researchers, these trends challenge us to do more to understand the cultural and psychological perceptions that frame how the public view activism, and the influence these have on their participation in both civil and civic society.

## Volunteering and the life cycle

Surprisingly little research has been done in Britain into the pattern of volunteering over the life cycle. However, among more than 50 studies on volunteering, giving, and civic participation undertaken under the auspices of the Canadian non-profit Sector Knowledge Base Project, is one from 2000 by **DR PAUL REED**, Director of the Centre for Applied Social Research at Carleton University, Ottawa, and his colleague **DR KEVIN SELBEE**.

They found that a change was underway from the pattern typically described by researchers as following a 'bell-shaped curve': participation rates low at young ages, increasing during midlife, and then declining after about age 55.

In fact, by 1997 there had been a sharp increase in rates of volunteering among people under age 25, which changed the life cycle pattern.

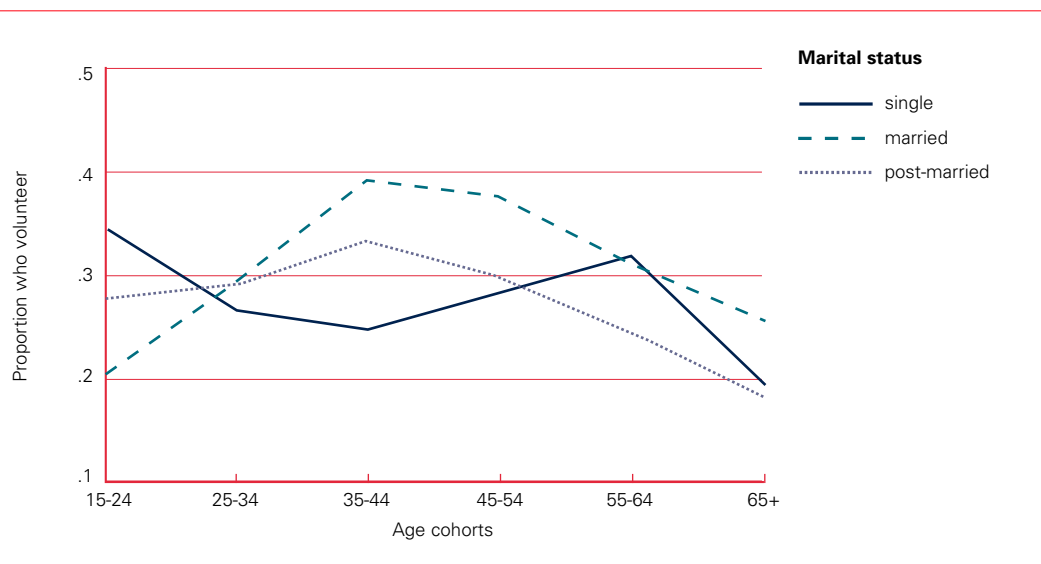
Repeatedly, the researchers found that groups with higher rates of volunteering were also more likely to be active in other spheres of community life such as membership of civic organisations, interaction with family and friends, church attendance, length of residence in the community, number of organisations volunteered for, and informal helping.

Volunteering levels related to age were significantly affected by the main life cycle states, such as marital status, whether there were children in the home, and people's work situation.

Among married and post-marriage (separated, divorced and widowed) individuals, age-specific rates of volunteering do indeed follow the bell-shaped curve. But among single individuals the profile across age groups is quite different. Rates are highest among young people, decline through mid life (25 to 44), rise again through ages 45 to 64, and finally decline sharply after age 65.



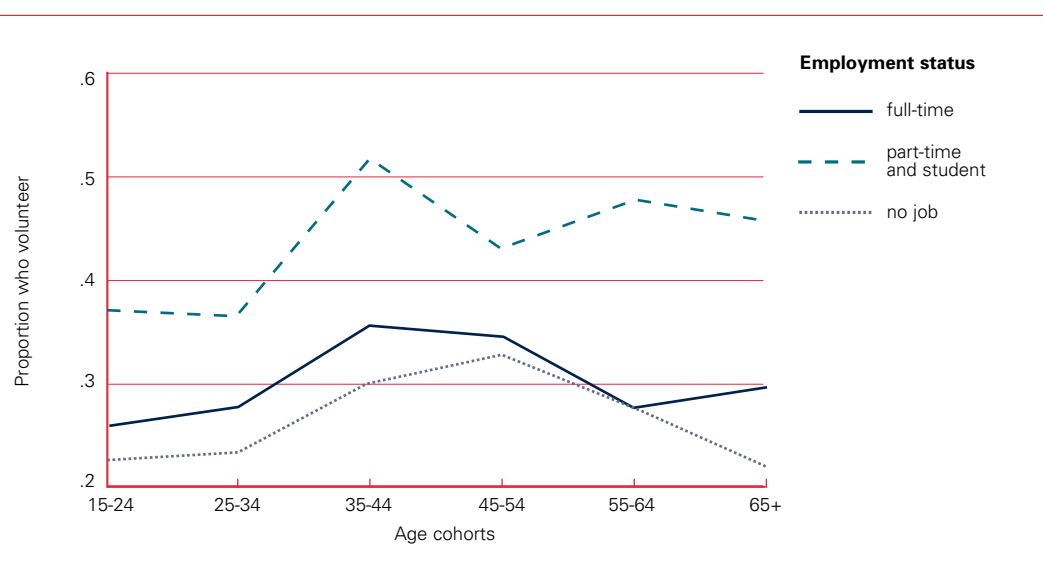
**Figure 1: Rates of volunteering by age and marital status**



Overall, married people volunteered more than those who were single, divorced, widowed or separated. The presence of children in the home, and their ages, also strongly affected volunteering. At all ages it was found that individuals with youngsters under the age of five volunteered least, those with children aged six and above did so most, and those without children fell somewhere in between.

Employment status also affects volunteering. The age-specific rates were very similar for those working full-time and those not in the labour force, and considerably lower than those for students or people working part-time.

**Figure 2: Rates of volunteering by age and employment status**



But whilst students and individuals in part-time work tended to volunteer more than those in full-time employment or not doing paid work, these patterns did not necessarily pertain throughout life.

For example, among the 15-24-year-olds, single individuals volunteered significantly more than those who were married. And levels of volunteering for part-time workers were not higher than those of people employed full-time.

So, say the researchers, there are important age-related differences in how life cycle events or status affect volunteering.

Just taking people without children, marital status makes a difference only to the youngest and oldest of the age groupings. With the youngest (15-24), it was single people who volunteered more than those who were married, while in the oldest (65+) married people volunteer more than those who are not.

For those aged between 25 and 64, marital status appeared to have no effect on volunteering if they did not have children.

The effect of marital status shifted again when the researchers examined people who had children over the age of six living at home. For them the effect of marital status was consistent for all ages 25 to 64: married individuals were more likely to volunteer than those who were not.

The Canadian study also classified people by religion, and found higher rates of volunteering for married individuals only among Catholics and Protestants. Among the No Religion and Other Religion groups, rates were virtually identical for marrieds and not-marrieds.

Disaggregating by gender and looking only at the Catholics and Protestants with children aged six and over showed that higher volunteering rates for married individuals were true of men but not women, for both denominations. While Catholic and Protestant men show no differences in rates by marital status, Catholic and Protestant women who were married were significantly more likely to volunteer than those who were single.



**Table 10: Types of Participation: Rates for Individuals Age 25-64 with Children 6 and Older, by Religion, Gender and Marital Status**

		Civic Participation	Social Participation	Church Attendance	Number of Organisations	Years in Community	Type of Informal Helping
<b>No Religion</b>							
Men	Not Married	0.53	6.3	–	0.36	9.2	2.7
	Married	0.86	6.8	–	0.60	9.4	2.7
	Difference <sup>1</sup>	ns	ns	–	ns	ns	ns
Women	Not Married	0.60	6.5	–	0.73	8.1	2.8
	Married	0.86	6.8	–	0.78	8.9	3.4
	Difference <sup>1</sup>	*	ns	–	ns	ns	*
<b>Catholic</b>							
Men	Not Married	0.82	5.1	6.8	0.56	8.7	2.3
	Married	1.10	6.6	15.4	0.64	10.2	2.8
	Difference <sup>1</sup>	ns	**	**	ns	*	ns
Women	Not Married	0.50	5.9	11.8	0.35	9.9	2.7
	Married	0.85	6.5	15.3	0.68	10.2	3.1
	Difference <sup>1</sup>	**	**	*	**	ns	*
<b>Protestant</b>							
Men	Not Married	1.10	6.1	9.1	0.58	10.8	3.3
	Married	1.40	7.7	13.3	1.12	10.2	3.1
	Difference <sup>1</sup>	ns	*	ns	ns	ns	ns
Women	Not Married	0.82	6.7	10.0	0.66	9.3	3.5
	Married	1.20	7.6	15.8	1.30	10.3	3.8
	Difference <sup>1</sup>	**	**	**	**	*	ns
<b>Other Religion</b>							
Men	Not Married	0.00	5.0	8.2	0.00	13.0	5.3
	Married	0.78	6.8	30.3	0.43	7.6	2.1
	Difference <sup>1</sup>	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	**
Women	Not Married	0.57	6.2	24.4	0.46	7.8	3.1
	Married	0.94	5.6	16.8	0.50	8.7	2.0
	Difference <sup>1</sup>	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
<p>1. The entries in the rows reflect tests for significant difference between the single and married rates. The test results are presented in terms of the following symbols:</p> <p>* significant at 0.05 level  ** significant at 0.01 level  ns not significant  n/a not applicable</p>							

Reed and Selbee suggest that refining the way proximate and extended relationships are measured may well offer a better understanding of the social dynamics that account for variations in rates of volunteering across the life cycle.

*Patterns of Volunteering over the Life Cycle* K Selbee and P Reed 2000  
<http://www.carleton.ca/socanth/casr/products.htm>



## Consumerism and volunteering replace voting

Cultures of consumerism, and to a lesser extent volunteering, are much more important in affecting turnout at elections in European countries than the influence of institutions, according to a recent paper by Paul Whiteley, Professor of Government at the University of Essex.

In it, Professor Whiteley, former Director of the ESRC-funded Democracy and Participation Research Programme, examines a number of contextual effects on election turnout by individuals, using data from the European Social Survey of 2002.

Available evidence suggests that age and gender are influencing these processes, with women being more affected by consumer participation than men, and the young more influenced than the old.

The researcher acknowledges that the cross-sectional nature of the analysis limits the claims that can be made about the long-term dynamics of electoral decline. But, work in progress on the British case, which uses a longitudinal analysis, supports these conclusions.

Professor Whiteley is a principal investigator for the 2005/06 ESRC-funded British Election Study, along with David Sanders, also of Essex, and Harold Clarke and Marianne Stewart, both of the School of Social Sciences, University of Texas, Dallas.

He says: *"Our findings so far are consistent with the idea that increasing numbers of people, particularly the young, prefer to participate via the supermarket and in the local community, rather than in national elections, and this is one of the reasons why we are observing declining electoral participation across Europe."*

**Where Have All the Voters Gone? Contextual Effects on Turnout in the European Democracies – A Multi-Level Modelling Approach, Paul Whiteley** (for the conference on 'Contextual Effects in Electoral Research', European University Institute, Florence, Italy, November 2006).  
[whiteley@essex.ac.uk](mailto:whiteley@essex.ac.uk)

**British Election Study**  
[www.essex.ac.uk/bes](http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes)

## Useful websites and other related research



### **The Commission on the Future of Volunteering**

was established by the England Volunteering Development Council to develop a long term vision for volunteering in England as a legacy of the Year of the Volunteer 2005. It is sponsored by the Volunteering Hub and supported by Volunteering England.

The consultation, which is open for public submissions until May 2007, will be focusing on the following areas for evidence:

- The relationship between volunteering and Government.
- Volunteering is for all.
- Developing a culture of volunteering.

The Commission, which is due to present its findings in autumn, 2007, wants to hear from volunteers and organisations in the voluntary, public and private sectors, in all regions of England, regardless of their background or experience.

<http://www.volcomm.org.uk>

The **Institute for Volunteering Research** is an initiative of Volunteering England in association with the

**Institute for  
Volunteering  
Research**



Centre for Institutional Studies at the **University of East London**, aiming to advance knowledge and understanding of volunteering in a way that is relevant to practitioners and policymakers. Its website provides an overview of the work of the Institute as well as detailed summaries of current research. The research and consultancy arm is a pioneer in the field of volunteering research and is regularly consulted by policymakers, the NHS, academics and major charities.

<http://www.ivr.org.uk/>

**involve – a not for profit organisation dedicated to understanding and promoting better civic participation**

<http://www.involve.org.uk>

**Education and Training for Governance and Active Citizenship in Europe (ETGACE)**

<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/politics/ETGACE>

**participation.net information for change**

<http://www.pnet.ids.ac.uk>

**Making sense of volunteering: a literature review, by Colin Rochester of the Centre for Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Research, Roehampton University, September 2006**

[http://www.volcomm.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/36A13A10-EF38-4E54-827E-A18270D3FE50/0/Literature\\_Review.pdf](http://www.volcomm.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/36A13A10-EF38-4E54-827E-A18270D3FE50/0/Literature_Review.pdf)

**Davis Smith, J. and Gey, P. (2006) Active ageing in active communities**

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=676>

**England Volunteering Development Council submission to the Commission on the Future of Volunteering, June 2006**

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AF5DF2D7-FB9E-4A08-978C-3118994D1445/0/EVDCSubmissiontotheCommissionontheFutureofVolunteering.pdf>



## Further Information

The full papers presented at the Individual Pathways in Participation seminar held at the NCVO in London on January 24 2007, including full details of academic references, are available on the ESRC Society Today website at: [www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk)

**Pathways to participation** – from volunteering to civil renewal to participative governance  
[j.annette@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:j.annette@bbk.ac.uk)

**I, you, we:** towards a psychology of participation in the public realm  
[stella@involve.org.uk](mailto:stella@involve.org.uk)

### **The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)**

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is the umbrella body for the voluntary sector in England. It works to support the voluntary sector and to create an environment in which voluntary organisations can flourish. It represents the views of the voluntary sector to policymakers and Government and consults with the sector to inform policy positions on issues generic to the sector. It also carries out in-depth research to promote a better understanding of the sector and its activities. NCVO has a growing membership of over 4,500 voluntary organisations, ranging from large national charities to small local community groups.

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