

# Men's organisational affiliations in later life: the influence of social class and marital status on informal group membership

KIM PERREN\*, SARA ARBER† and KATE DAVIDSON†

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper considers a dimension of social life that has been largely neglected in the research literature on ageing, older men's involvement with informal associations. These affiliations represent an under-valued resource which may contribute to the quality of life of older men by facilitating social interaction and providing a context for continued social productivity. Using the *British Household Panel Survey* for 1999, we explore the engagement of men aged 65 or more years with civic groups (such as political parties or voluntary agencies), religious organisations, and sports and social clubs. Involvement in civic and religious groups and sports clubs is common among middle class older men, while social club membership is common among working class men. Only a small amount of these differences can be explained by variations in health, income and access to private transport. Compared with partnered older men, widowers are more likely to be involved with sports and social clubs, while men who are divorced or never married are less likely to be a member of any informal group.

**KEY WORDS** – older men, informal organisations, social class, marital status.

## **Introduction**

Social research into later life has often focused on the experiences of women (Arber and Ginn 1991: vii; Thompson 1994) with particular attention being paid to their capacity to maintain supportive social networks. As well as being the linchpin of their family network, most older women have close and rewarding non-kin relationships (Jerrome 1981; Wenger 1984). In recent years, attention has turned to the social lives of older men and, in particular, to the problems faced by those who live alone and/or are working class. These two demographic characteristics are associated with

\* Centre for Research in Social Policy, University of Loughborough.

† Centre for Research on Ageing and Gender, University of Surrey.

an increased likelihood of experiencing loneliness, social isolation and depression (Lowenthal and Robinson 1976; Dibner 1983; Wenger *et al.* 1996). While these problems may reflect inadequate social ties, the research presented here considers one sphere of activity which may be amenable to policy intervention; the engagement of older men in informal organisations.

Unlike other forms of social attachment, such as involvement in family life or the world of work, informal group membership is nominally accessible to all. Numerous groups are tailored to the perceived needs of older people, such as luncheon clubs and day centres. Research reveals however that many older people shun these venues. The clientele are predominantly working class widows (Jerrome 1989), while older men are poorly represented (Thlewis 2001). Our qualitative research suggests that the emphasis on 'doing things for' the clients discourages men from being involved in groups organised specifically for older people (Davidson *et al.* 2002). The associations studied in this paper range from social and sports clubs to religious groups and civic organisations (such as voluntary agencies, community groups and political parties). Some are overtly leisure-oriented while others appear to be guided by a spirit of altruism, religious belief or shared principles. While all facilitate social interaction, some additionally offer the opportunity to pursue a personal goal (such as health maintenance) or to make a recognised social contribution through community activity.

Role theorists view the transition into economic inactivity in later life as problematic for men but not for women (Casey 1992; Ginn and Arber 1996). From this perspective, a worker role is central to masculine identity, and the economic domain is the primary venue for pursuing life goals. Consequently, retirement represents a stripping away of validation built up over the course of the earlier adult life (Atchley 1994; Solomon and Szwabo 1994). Activities promoted by 'civic' organisations (such as community and political groups) facilitate involvement in a range of 'work-like' roles in the pursuit of clearly defined goals. Thus, the opportunity to be part of a socially productive organisation may bolster the wellbeing of older men by compensating for some of the losses following retirement from paid work.

### **The influence of social class and material resources on organisational membership**

Studies have shown that, in later life, middle class people are more likely to engage in both formal volunteering and organised leisure than working

class people (Davis Smith 1992; Midwinter 1992; Wenger 1992). Involvement may be facilitated by resources more commonly available to the middle classes, such as a high disposable income, access to a car and good health (Arber 1989). This is supported by research carried out for the *National Survey of Voluntary Activity* where a quarter of volunteers reported being 'out of pocket' as a result of their involvement (cited in Davis Smith 1992). In addition, high levels of geographical mobility among middle class older people and their families may prompt them to initiate non-kin social contacts. A study by Abrams identified that middle class people who were new to an area saw involvement in neighbourhood care schemes as a way of integrating with the community (Bulmer 1986).

The fact that volunteers are disproportionately likely to be middle class may also reflect a class disparity in labour market experiences. The idea that masculine identity is bound up with being successful and pro-active is associated with middle class, rather than working class, occupations (Fischer and Schaffer 1993). Consequently, middle class retirees may feel a greater need to compensate for the loss of their productive role than their working class counterparts. Even across the range of non-manual occupations, social class has been found to impact upon attitudes towards economic inactivity in later life. Mein *et al.* (1998) studied recently retired civil servants and found that men and women who had been in the highest grades expressed feelings of guilt that they were no longer socially productive. By contrast, those from lower grades were likely to feel that they had earned their retirement. Gilleard and Higgs (2000: 48) argue that in contemporary society older people can shake off the identities of their working life, and question the conventional view that retirees 'should be forever *ex* people – ex-miners, ex-teachers, ex-labourers, ex-nurses – irrevocably defined by their former position in the productive process'. One of the aims of this paper is to assess the extent to which occupational experiences continue to inform the lives of older men.

Research into the social worlds of lone older men has been predominantly concerned with the impact of widowhood on social relationships (Ferraro and Barresi 1982; Wenger 1984); while very little is known about the later-life activities of divorced and never-married men. This neglect reflects the fact that only a tiny minority of older men fall into these categories. Among men currently aged 75 and more years and living in the community, 30 per cent are widowed, while only three per cent have never married and two per cent are divorced or separated (Bridgwood *et al.* 2000: Table 5.2). In the years to come, however, these figures are set to rise: in the 65–74 years age group, seven per cent of men have never been married while the same proportion are divorced or separated. Diverse routes to becoming a lone older man may give rise to differing

opportunities in later life. It has been suggested that conjugal loss decreases the amount of leisure time available to older men as they struggle to master domestic tasks previously performed by their spouse (Bennett and Morgan 1993). By contrast, never-married older men have had a life-time to reconcile the demands of the domestic and social spheres. Never-married men are unlikely to have children, while divorce tends to attenuate the relationships between men and their adult children (Amato *et al.* 1995; Perren and Davidson 2002). It is plausible that never-married and divorced men may compensate by forming non-kin relationships. Never getting married, or not re-marrying following divorce, may however also be a sign that a man is content with his own company. These considerations give some indication that, overall, organisational activity rates may differ by marital status, but they shed no light on whether older men with differing marital histories have a tendency to be members of different types of informal groups. The aims of this paper are to examine the ways in which social class, based on occupation during working life, and marital status, are associated with different types of organisational involvement among older men.

### **Data and methods**

This paper uses data from the *British Household Panel Survey* (BHPS) for 1999. The BHPS was initiated in 1991 when a representative sample of around 10,000 adults living in some 5,500 households was interviewed about their work and family life, health, finances, and attitudes and opinions on social and political issues (Taylor *et al.* 2001). The sample members have been re-interviewed annually, together with any adults who subsequently joined their household and any children who had reached 16 years of age. In 1999, additional Scottish and Welsh households were included to facilitate research into issues concerned with devolution. Consequently, in this latter year, just over 15,000 individuals completed a full individual interview. The use of weights ensured that this larger sample remained representative of Great Britain at the end of the 20th century. The research presented in this paper is based on 1,109 men aged 65 or more years who completed a full interview at Wave 9 (1999), and who were living in Great Britain.

#### *Measures of organisational activity*

Respondents were shown an extensive list of organisations and asked to which groups they belonged. The analysis presented in this paper excludes

TABLE 1. Organisational membership by age group of men aged 65 or more years

Type of organisation	Age groups (years)					Gamma
	65-69 %	70-74 %	75-79 %	80+ %	All %	
Civic group	26	26	25	22	25	ns
Political party	5	5	9	10	7	
Environmental group	6	3	2	2	3	
Tenants'/residents' group	13	15	15	11	14	
Voluntary service group	6	5	8	3	5	
Parents' association	1	2	0	0	1	
Scouts/guides organisation	0	3	1	0	1	
Other community group	6	6	4	4	5	
Religious group	14	12	19	14	15	ns
Sports club	17	13	12	6	13	***
Social club	23	16	16	10	17	***
Pensioners' organisation	4	6	5	7	5	
Other organisation	8	10	10	7	9	
Any listed organisation	59	51	53	48	53	*
Sample size	321	326	260	202	1,109	

Note: Significance levels: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , ns: not significant.

membership of women-only groups, trades unions and professional bodies. The last two are excluded because their close association with the world of work indicates that they cannot be considered as 'civic' or social organisations. Furthermore, for the minority of older men still in employment, involvement in these groups may not be voluntary. The remaining groups were used to construct four types of organisation:

- Civic groups* – comprise a range of goal-oriented organisations such as political parties and voluntary groups that may be seen as benefitting wider society (the organisations which fall under this heading are listed in Table 1).
- Religious groups* – membership denotes affiliation with a respected social institution as well as access to people who hold similar beliefs.
- Sports clubs* – generally facilitate health-promoting physical activity which, for many people, is a valued personal goal.
- Social clubs* – offer sociability which is not usually goal-oriented.

Two of the original BHPS items cannot be incorporated into any of these four groups because of ambiguity over their members' activities, namely pensioners' and 'other' organisations. These two groups have, however, been included in the analyses which consider membership of any of the organisations listed in Table 1. Six variables or constructs were expected to

influence organisational activity: health status, household income, household car access, occupational class, marital status and age group.<sup>1</sup>

### **Organisational membership in later life**

Table 1 lists membership rates for each of the organisational types among men aged 65 and more years (excluding women's groups, trades unions and professional bodies). It also gives these rates by five-year age groups (65–69; 70–74; 75–79; 80+). For the five types of organisation examined in this paper (civic, religious, sports, social and any), the statistical significance of the association between age group and membership is denoted by the gamma statistic in the final column. This gives an insight into how the organisational activity of older men changes with age.

Overall, around half of older men report membership of an informal organisation. A quarter are involved in a civic group (most commonly a residents' association, political party or voluntary organisation). One in six belongs to a social club; one in seven reports membership of a religious group; and one in eight belongs to a sports club; but only one in 20 report membership of a pensioners' group. Membership of sports and social clubs reveals a significant decline with increasing chronological age; in both cases the proportion of older men who are members at age 80 and more years is less than half of that for those aged 65–69 years. The decline in membership of any organisation is more modest, but is still statistically significant.

### **Social class variations in organisational membership and access to resources**

Figure 1 shows the percentage of older men who are members of each of the four types of organisation broken down by social class. In each case, the association with class is significant at  $p = < 0.001$  (gamma). The profile of membership for the civic organisations reveals an exceptionally strong class gradient. Almost half of all men who were in professional or managerial jobs report involvement in civic groups (44%), compared with just one in seven of those with a working class background (either skilled or partly/unskilled manual workers). This class gradient is replicated for each of the more specific types of organisations in the civic category, such as political and environmental parties, residents' associations, and voluntary agencies (analyses not shown). Class differences in membership rates for religious organisations and sports clubs present a less steep gradient in the

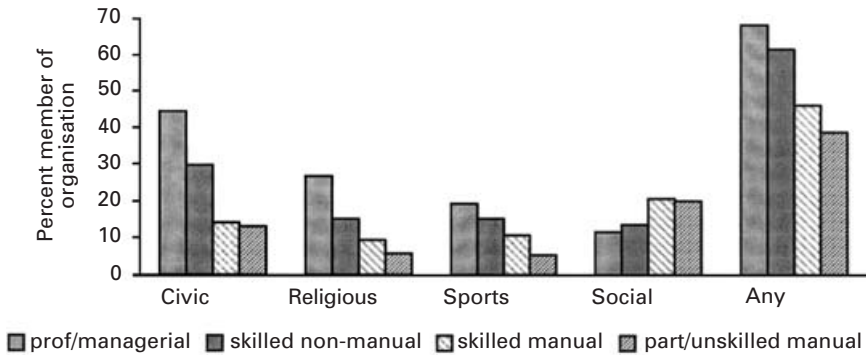


Figure 1. Organisational membership at age 65+ by social class.

same direction. Social clubs are the only type of organisation in which working class older men are more likely to be members than higher status groups. A fifth of older men with backgrounds in the two working class groups belong to a social club compared with around one in seven of those with non-manual routine occupation backgrounds and one in nine who held professional or managerial positions. Overall, a majority of middle class older men, but only a minority of working class older men, are members of at least one informal organisation. Two-thirds of those with a professional or managerial background are members of a group, as are three-fifths of those with a non-manual routine job background. This compares with just under half of skilled manual workers and two-fifths of those with a partly-skilled or unskilled manual background.

Since resources may influence an older man's capacity to engage in organisational activity, the associations of occupational-based social class with access to four indicators of socio-economic and health resources (good health, above median income, a household car, and a partner) have been examined (Figure 2).

All four are significantly associated with social class at the level of  $p < 0.001$ . In each case, professional or managerial men are most likely to have access to the resource, while partly-skilled and unskilled manual workers are least likely. Four-fifths of those with middle class backgrounds (professional/managerial and routine non-manual) say their health is good, compared with around three-fifths of those who had held working class jobs (skilled and partly/unskilled manual). The majority of middle class older men had above-median household incomes (three-quarters of professional/managerial men and just over half of routine non-manual men). This compared with around a third of men with working class backgrounds. Eight in 10 professional/managerial men, and seven in 10 routine

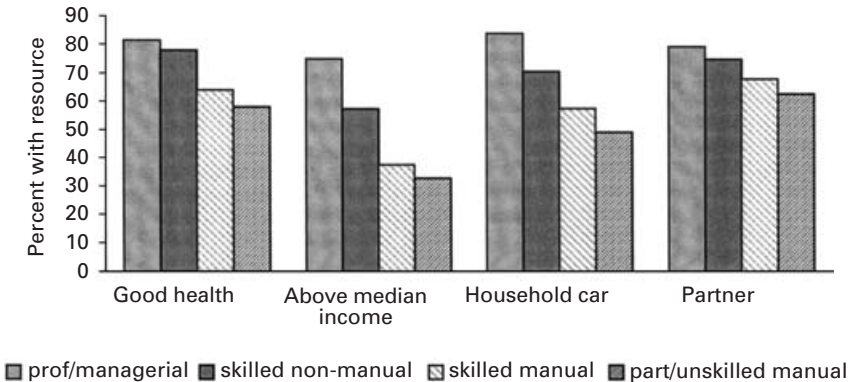


Figure 2. Socio-economic resources and partner status at age 65+ by social class.

non-manual men, had access to a household car, compared with just over half of working class older men. Finally, four-fifths of professional or managerial men, and three-quarters of routine non-manual men, were married or cohabiting, compared with two-thirds of skilled manual workers and around three-fifths of older men with a semi- or partly-skilled manual background.

### **The influence of resources, social class and marital status on organisational membership**

Multivariate analysis is used to examine the extent to which social class variations in older men's organisational activity reflect differences in health, marital status and material resources (Table 2). The outcome measures are dichotomous (the man is either a member or not a member) and the analyses take the form of logistic regressions. For each of the predictor variables, one category is designated the reference group and given an odds ratio of 1.00. Each of the other categories is then contrasted with this reference group.<sup>2</sup> Three variables represent likely obstacles to participation in organisational activity: where health is rated as 'fair or poor', lack of access to a car, and low household income. For the dichotomous measures, the reference category is omitted from the table. For the four-category social class variable, semi-/unskilled manual workers were set as the reference category. For the marital status variable, partnered men are contrasted with those who are widowed, divorced (or separated), and never married. Finally, we consider the extent to which age group has a residual effect on participation in organisational activity.



TABLE 2. Odds ratios of membership of different types of organisation for men aged 65 or more years

Variable	Types of organisation									
	Civic		Religious		Sports		Social		Any	
	Odds	Sig.	Odds	Sig.	Odds	Sig.	Odds	Sig.	Odds	Sig.
Good health	1.47	*	1.65	*	1.20	ns	0.83	ns	1.30	ns
Household car	1.87	***	1.00	ns	3.54	***	0.83	ns	1.53	**
Household income		*		**		ns		ns		ns
Lowest quintile	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
2nd quintile	1.00		1.11		0.89		0.78		0.93	
Middle quintile	1.54		1.17		0.82		1.02		1.16	
4th quintile	1.94	**	1.31		1.44		1.25		1.41	
Highest quintile	1.58		2.55	**	0.93		0.79		1.30	
Social class		***		***		*		*		***
Prof/managerial	3.32	***	3.84	***	2.82	**	0.54	*	2.38	***
Routine non manual	2.05	**	2.50	*	2.39	*	0.65		2.02	**
Skilled manual	0.94		1.72		1.89		1.01		1.20	
Part/unsk manual	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
Marital status		ns		*		***		**		*
Partnered	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
Widowed	0.79		0.54	*	2.89	***	1.73	*	1.14	
Divorced	0.72		0.47		0.38		0.86		0.55	*
Never married	0.98		1.88		0.54		0.31	*	0.57	*
Age group (years)		ns		ns		**		***		ns
65–69	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
70–74	1.03		0.97		0.62	*	0.55	**	0.66	
75–79	1.07		1.64		0.58	*	0.52	**	0.74	
80+	1.11		1.52		0.24	***	0.25	***	0.64	
Sample size	1,109		1,109		1,109		1,109		1,109	

Note: Sig. indicates significance levels: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , ns: not significant.

The odds ratios of membership of the four main types of organisation (civic and religious groups, sports and social clubs) are presented in Table 2, followed by membership of any organisation. Taking first the *civic groups*, having good health and access to a car are associated with an increased likelihood of being involved. Compared with older men living in the lowest income households, those in the fourth quintile have almost twice the odds of being involved; while those in the third and fifth quintiles have a higher (but statistically non-significant) likelihood of membership. After controlling for these factors, social class still exerts a strong effect. Compared with semi- and unskilled manual workers, the odds of involvement in civic associations is more than three times as high among professional or managerial groups, and twice as high among those with a

routine non-manual background. There is no significant effect of marital status or age on membership of civic groups.

Turning to membership of *religious groups*, good health and a very high household income are both associated with an increased likelihood of membership, but access to a car is not important. There is a very strong association with social class, for both professional/managerial men and routine non-manual men are exceptionally likely to be involved. Widowed men are less likely to be members of a religious group than partnered men, while both widowed and divorced men are significantly less likely to be involved than never-married men (analysis not shown). There is no significant effect of age on membership of a religious group.

Regarding memberships of *sports clubs*, neither health nor household income is significantly associated with membership, but men with access to a household car have three times higher odds of being involved than those without. There is a clear class gradient: involvement is highest among professional or managerial men and lowest among those who had held semi- or un-skilled manual jobs. Compared with partnered men, those who are widowed have almost three times higher odds of being members. Sports club membership declines markedly with increasing age. It is surprising that there is no link between health and sports club membership, but additional analysis (not detailed) reveals a significant interaction between social class and health status in predicting sports club membership. Having less than good health decreases the likelihood of membership among working class older men, but has the opposite effect among middle class men. This suggests that many older middle class men join a sports club as a response to health problems.

There was no significant association between *social club* membership and health, income or car access. Men with professional or managerial backgrounds had half the odds of being members as those who had held manual jobs. Compared with partnered men, those who were widowed were more likely to be members, while those who were never married were less likely to be involved. Social club membership declines sharply with increasing age.

Table 2 also shows the associations with membership of *any informal organisation*: there is no significant association between health or household income and involvement, but having a household car increases the likelihood of being a member. Membership is most common for the two middle class groups (professional or managerial and routine non-manual), and least common among older men who are divorced and those who never married. For these two marital status groups, the log odds of membership of any informal organisation are just over half of those for partnered men. There is no significant association with age.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

One of the most striking findings of these analyses is the strength of the association between organisational activity and social class. Working class older men have a low likelihood of engaging in community and religious organisations and sports clubs but a higher likelihood of being members of a social club. These associations do not simply reflect the lower levels of health and material resources among men with working class employment histories, but exist independently of these potential constraints. Men in the highest social groups are more involved in sports clubs, which is likely to promote their physical health, and in civic and religious organisations, which may include involvement in activities that are altruistic or benefit the community. This contrasts with working class men who are more likely to undertake sociable leisure, which while promoting sociability and social integration is less likely to lead to the promotion of individual good health or involvement in broader community-based activities.<sup>3</sup> This class disparity has implications for social policy initiatives directed at older people which seek to combine social interaction with some other 'benefit', such as enhanced physical health or community action. It suggests that working class older men, who have been identified as most vulnerable to isolation (Lowenthal and Robinson 1976), are less likely to be attracted to these types of facilities. There is no indication that lack of resources impedes membership of sports or social clubs, but the substantial decline in the membership rate with increasing age clearly needs further investigation.

In later life, there are notable differences between the organisational activities of partnered, widowed, divorced and never married men. The fact that never married older men are less likely to be members of an informal group than those with a partner is consistent with the idea that some men are life-long 'isolates' who choose neither to marry nor to get involved in discretionary social activities. Their higher rate of church membership (compared with widowers and divorcees) is not incompatible with this interpretation, as involvement in religious activities may not be motivated by an interest in social interaction but by personal beliefs. Compared with partnered older men, those who are widowed are more likely to be involved with sports and social clubs, perhaps indicating that leisure associations offer compensations for the change in their partner status. This pattern is not evident for men who are divorced, however, for they have the lowest level of involvement in 'any' organisation and are particularly unlikely to be members of sports clubs or religious organisations.

The research presented in this paper has identified the clear effects of occupational class during working life on men's organisational activity in

later life, and these must be acknowledged by agencies seeking to facilitate social interaction among vulnerable groups of older men. The analyses also highlight the importance of considering marital status when exploring the social needs of older men without a partner. Among the current cohorts of older men in Britain, divorce is a relatively rare occurrence, but among those currently in mid-life it is much more common (Bridgwood *et al.* 2000). Consequently, the low incidence of organisational activity among divorced older men could point to a burgeoning social group who will be at increased risk of isolation in the next few decades. Finally, the heightened organisational activity of widowed men, who appear to gravitate towards sports and social clubs, reminds us of the active choices made by men as they construct and maintain social relationships in later life.

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### NOTES

- 1 *Health status* is based upon a self-report where the original categories were ‘excellent’, ‘very good’, ‘good’, ‘fair’ and ‘poor’. In these analyses, a dichotomy is used which represents whether a respondent rates his health as ‘fair/poor’ or ‘good/very good/excellent’. *Household income* is represented by two variables. One identifies whether the household income falls below the median for all households containing men aged 65 or more years; the other breaks down the distribution into quintiles, both after housing costs are met and having adjusted for household composition using the McClements Scale (Taylor *et al.* 2001). *Household car access* identifies whether the respondent lives in a household where there is a car or van available for his personal use. *Occupational class* is based on the respondent’s most recent occupation using the Registrar General’s classification (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys 1991). A class variable identifies professional/managerial (classes I and II combined); skilled non-manual (class III non-manual); skilled manual (class III manual); and partly/unskilled manual (classes IV and V combined). *Marital status* distinguishes between partnered men (married or cohabiting) and those who are currently widowed, divorced (or separated), or never married. *Age groups* in the analysis are 65–69, 70–74, 75–79 and 80 or more years.
- 2 For instance, for the marital status variable, the ‘partnered man’ category has an odds ratio of 1.00. Any marital status category with an odds ratio of below 1.00 has a lower likelihood of organisational membership compared with partnered men; any with odds ratios above 1.00 have a greater likelihood of membership.
- 3 There will of course be exceptions to this generalisation. Some working class social clubs are strongly oriented towards, if not specialised in, (moderately) physically demanding activities, *e.g.* allotment produce competitions, soccer, cricket and bowling teams, and bar games.

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*Address for correspondence:*

Sara Arber, Centre for Research on Ageing and Gender, Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH, UK.  
e-mail: s.arber@surrey.ac.uk