

## **Sports Volunteering –from formal to informal- who benefits?**

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### **Introduction**

Sports volunteers serve public, private and educational sectors and provide huge social, technical, economic and intellectual capacity. Currently sports volunteering in the UK accounts for 28% of all volunteering activity with 15% of all UK adults volunteering for sport (Sport England 2003). There are also over 151,000 sports clubs in the UK (46% of them having existed for more than 30 years), which not only provide the majority of volunteering opportunities in sport but perhaps more significantly an important potential source for the development of human, social, physical and institutional capital at both individual and societal level. (Nichols 2003).

Thus volunteering within sport in the UK is multi-faceted and has to serve an increasing number of constituencies; on the one hand sports clubs organised by their members – in the form of mutual aid/self help groups – are generally viewed as the most important organisational structure in which sports volunteering takes place, even above schools, youth organisations and the Church (Talbot 2004). On the other hand changes to systems of governance within sport in the UK have meant that local authorities, who fund approximately 80% of all sport related activity (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002), together with other key agencies (particularly the governing bodies of sport) are having a serious impact on perceptions, understandings and involvement of those individuals who wish to volunteer in sport.

Volunteers are fundamental to the success of most programmed sport activities, and serve in many positions as coaches, administrators, fund-raisers, and committee members within sports clubs (Shibli et al 1999, Nichols et al 1998). In addition, sport volunteers are also to be found in significant numbers within the organisation and running of specific events, such as Commonwealth and Olympic games. In marked contrast to much previous research on volunteering (Davis-Smith et al 1995, Davis-Smith 1998, Taylor et al 1996) this paper diverges from the norm in terms of interpreting key aspects that define who the volunteer is – in terms of informal and formal. Hence this paper identifies the formal sports volunteer as one who exhibits or is linked to notions of instrumentalism or rational action in relation to their sports activity. Whilst the informal variation tends to be characterised by its location, which is often within a mutual aid organisation with a distinct tendency for autonomy necessitating an avoidance for being ‘managed’ or controlled (Nichols & Garrett 2001). Thus for formal and informal sports volunteers the desire for particular types of support network will differ and this is likely to be reflected in relationships to structures of governance. Essentially then informal volunteers choose to involve themselves in networks, norms and values that facilitate co-operation within or among groups (OECD 2001). Whilst formal volunteers desire a more formal training type network commensurate with their perceived volunteering output, rather than developing further issues such as trust and reciprocity per se (Putnam 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the types of volunteers operating within community sports clubs in relation to their formal/informal status and to analyse the factors affecting their a) decisions to volunteer and b) contextual relationships relevant to particular forms of sports volunteering. Was the decision based on the benefits accruing to the individual or based on perceived altruism. In this sense Rational choice (action) theory may prove illuminating in that it shares with classical economics a belief that all behaviour results from individuals pursuing their own interests (Coleman 1994, Field 2003) and may come as a counterbalance to the agency/structure debate which has largely been ignored by scholars involved in volunteering research.

### **Methods**

The methods used for this research are twofold; firstly involving a large structured questionnaire involving some ten sports in eight English Local Authorities and secondly unstructured in-depth interviews with community sports clubs volunteers across five sports – including both individual and team sports as well as clubs operating at different performance levels. This approach facilitates the opportunity to probe in

more depth the key issues and access the underlying factors affecting decision-making by volunteers in sport.

### Discussion

Our findings showed that community sports club volunteers' choices were path dependent on whether they considered themselves to be formal or informal. If they considered themselves the former then they were seeking a payback from their volunteering in the form of training, skill enhancement and networking opportunities relating to their career. In effect they were making decisions that reflected their position as a utility-maximising rational individual engaged in a strategic interaction to volunteer. If individuals perceived themselves as informal volunteers then they were likely to be involved in an equilibrium particular to their situation whereby 'the rules of the game' were acting to constrain those individuals and moreover 'the rules of the game' were constructed and rationalised by the very same people they effect.

Thus mechanisms for generating an equilibrium (for informal volunteers) involved:

Giving something back	To continue to do what I enjoy have fun
To work with other people in something I believe in	To work with young people
To use my time well to offer skills to others	To do something different from my job
To help my children/partner/community	

Government and local authorities in Britain are increasingly involved changing governance structures which impact on the way community sports clubs and their volunteers have operated for over 100 years. (Houlihan 2002). It is within this wider context that the symbiotic relationship of the volunteer and sport can be understood, the role of the volunteer engaged in sport is likely to come even further under the microscope as sports clubs become a contested site for social action.

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