

# AN EXAMINATION OF THE CHANGING MOTIVATIONS OF VOLUNTEERS OVER THE COURSE OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN SPORT

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## **Context**

The reliance on volunteers for the delivery and administration of sport in the UK is gaining increasing attention. For example, two of the eleven priorities in SportsScotland's (2003) strategic plan relate to the importance and development of volunteers. Similarly, Sport England identifies the enormous contribution made by volunteers, Taylor et al (2003) stating that nearly 6 million people volunteered in sport-related activities each year. This contribution amounts to over 1.2 billion hours and is estimated to be worth over £14 billion. Despite this recognition, research in the UK has been inclined to focus more on how many people volunteer rather than *why* they choose to do so. If sport is to continue to depend on the actions of volunteers, then it is vital that there is some understanding of the characteristics of such people, and the motivations that underpin their involvement in sport. So, the focus of this research was to examine how the motivation of volunteers change over the course of their involvement in sport.

Whilst the literature on motivations for work is rather well developed, understanding the motives of the volunteer is rather superficial. Willis (1992) argued that the 'volunteer life cycle' had three main motivational stages. Each stage has associated motivations and consequently requires a different range of management strategies. For instance, motivations are likely to change as volunteers become involved in decision-making processes and as they rise in the organisation's hierarchy, and so retaining more senior volunteers is likely to be influenced by their perceptions of the effectiveness of its management (Cuskelly, 1996). However, research concerning volunteer motivation is generally restricted to examining the motives that people give for initiating their involvement, which is more closely associated with recruitment strategies rather than retention. The intention of this research is to explore motivation across all the stages of the 'volunteer life cycle' and thereby provide those charged with supporting volunteers a better understanding of them..

## **Methods**

Data were collected in the form of 8 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The participants were purposefully selected as volunteers who had a range of experience, tenure, and roles. The interview questions were open-ended and contained various prompts allowing the researcher to explore various issues, namely:

- the initial reasons that led to the volunteer's involvement in sport
- the processes and practices that encouraged them to continue their early involvement; and
- the reasons associated with their long-term commitment to the sporting organisation.

Themes and topics of relevance that emerged from early interviews were incorporated into subsequent interviews. Each interview was audio recorded, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and was transcribed into a word processing programme. The interviews were analysed using a thematic approach (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The authors acknowledge the limitations of the small sample size and suggest care is taken in interpreting the findings, but it is sufficient for an exploratory study.

## **Results and Discussion**

Analysis of the interviews identified three main motivational themes: life-stage benefits; connections to the organisation; and altruism. Each of these motivations continued throughout the career of the volunteers, but the nature of the motivation became more complex as time progressed.

### ***Life-stage benefits***

In the initial stage, volunteers sought a range of benefits, such as educational or training opportunities. Additionally, they sought intangible benefits like enjoyment or the feeling of being needed. What maintained their involvement in the organisation, was initial successes in receiving these benefits.

What was more important, however, was the “pleasantness of the operating environment” and the social network that was established. Long-term commitment developed as the volunteer activity became integrated into their day-to-day living and the volunteer relied on their involvement for social and psychological support.

### ***Connections to the organisation***

In the initial stage, the volunteers’ connections with the organisation were usually of a secondary nature. For instance, someone volunteered because of a friend’s or family member’s involvement with the sport. As volunteers became more involved, they began to ‘own’ their role and establish a primary connection to it. As in the previous theme, long-term commitment was associated with a deep social and psychological connection. Individuals volunteered, not just because of kin/friends’ involvement or enjoyment in a specific role, but more importantly, because of an emotional attachment to the sport. For example, one volunteer remarked that she volunteered because she “loved the people and the sport.”

### ***Altruism***

Altruism was one of the most commonly cited motives for volunteering. However, this research’s findings suggest that the nature of altruism changed the longer the volunteer remained in the organisation. Volunteers initially volunteered to ‘do something worthwhile.’ What often led to the retention of the volunteer was that they enjoyed the experience and gained satisfaction through helping others. The long-term volunteer had a more complex understanding of the altruistic benefit of their involvement. These volunteers spoke of the importance of their roles and the consequences for the organisation if they did not do the task. Furthermore, they identified the benefits the community as a whole received from the work of their organisation and their volunteering.

The conference presentation will explore the development and complexity of each of these themes in greater detail. The next stage of this research will be to identify management strategies that will assist in moving towards more sophisticated understandings of volunteering and assist in their retention.

### **References**

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