Getting in the Game: An Investigation of Older Adult Volunteers in Sport

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Volunteer committees and boards continue to be the backbone of community-based sport organizations (Cuskey & Boag, 2001). However, a declining rate of volunteering means there are too few volunteers to do the work required (Doherty, 2005b; Gratton, Nichols, Shibli, & Taylor, 1997; Taylor et al., 2003). Recruiting volunteers is one of the greatest challenges facing community sport organizations (Doherty, 2005b; Taylor et al., 2003). A profile of sport volunteers suggests that older adults (65 years and older) are not part of the current "recruitment niche" (Nichols & King, 1999) in community sport. The typical sport volunteer is younger (35-44 years), male, employed full-time, with young dependents at home, and became involved through a child (Doherty, 2005a). Yet older adults may be "a new source of experience" (Misener & Doherty, 2006) to enhance the community sport volunteer workforce.

According to the 2004 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (Hall, Lasby, Gumulka, & Tryon, 2006), and the 2005 Current Population Survey in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005), older adults contribute on average the most volunteer hours of any age group. Volunteering is promoted as a healthy, post-retirement activity for seniors (Prisuta, 2004) that provides an outlet for using their developed skills and abilities (Rook & Sorkin, 2003; Warburton, Rosenman, & Shapiro, 2001). There is profound potential for recruiting these skilled and mature individuals into volunteering, many of whom are looking for meaningful ways to give their time (Volunteer Canada, 2001). To understand the potential for recruiting in sport, it is important to consider how and why older adults have become involved as volunteers in community sport organizations, and to explore their experiences in this context (cf. Nagchoudhuri et al., 2005).

The purpose of this study was to examine factors influencing the involvement of older adult volunteers in sport, and to further explore their perceptions of their sport volunteer experience. The Peters-Davis, Burant and Braunschweig (2001) four-factor model for determining older adult volunteerism provided a framework for examining factors influencing older adult volunteers in sport. The model contends that certain structural (e.g., social status and level of education), cultural (e.g., past volunteer behaviour), situational (e.g., perceived opportunity), and cognitive influences (e.g., motives and ideology) are determinants of volunteering for older adults. In combination with the above model, an exploratory approach was used to examine the experiences of older adult volunteers in community sport.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 older adult volunteers (65 years and older) within community sport organizations across Southern Ontario. Community sport organizations were contacted and asked to identify any older adult volunteers within their club who would be willing to participate. These individuals were then contacted directly. Semi-structured interviews were used to facilitate a consistent line of questioning among the participants, while encouraging participants to elaborate on their responses (Patton, 2002). The interview guide was developed to measure the four factors in the Peters-Davis et al.'s (2001) model, and to allow for the exploration of the participants' experiences in community sport. For example, participants were asked what kinds of activities they engage in within their social circle (structural), to describe their past involvement in sport and volunteering in general (cultural), to elaborate on the older adult volunteer opportunities in their community (situational), and why they started volunteering with their current sport organization (cognitive). The interview also explored the volunteers' experiences; for example, whether they believe they make a difference in their sport organization, and what their sport organization could do to attract other older adult volunteers.

The audio-recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim, and will be analyzed using both a priori and open coding methods. A priori coding, where a given set of standards guides the analysis process (Patton, 2002), will be used to deductively analyze the data with respect to the four factor model of older adult volunteerism (Peters-Davis et al., 2001). The qualitative methodology also allows for exploration, discovery, and inductive logic (Patton, 2002), therefore any themes that emerge within a given factor will be analyzed. Inductive analysis, which begins with the extraction of specific codes and builds towards general patterns, will be used to uncover any themes with regard to the volunteers' experiences in their sport organization. The presentation of findings will highlight what the older adult volunteers identified as the common and most important factors influencing their involvement in sport. An overview of the themes describing their experiences within their sport organization will also be presented.
With a drop in the rate of volunteering across all sectors, many voluntary organizations have an enhanced interest in understanding the characteristics, motivations, and desires of individuals who contribute their time to these organizations, in order to be better equipped to recruit additional volunteers (Reed & Selbee, 2000). The findings of the current study will provide an important foundation for understanding older adult volunteers in sport, and helping voluntary sport organizations to be better positioned to expand their recruitment niche and tap into this group of potential volunteers. The implications for older adult volunteer recruitment in sport will be presented along with recommended directions for further research.

Selected references: