

Volunteer roles, involvement and commitment in voluntary sport organizations: Evidence of core and peripheral volunteers

Abstract

The nature and scope of volunteer involvement in sport is well established, however research indicates that involvement in community sport volunteering is under threat (Cuskelly, 2005; Cuskelly, Taylor, Hoye & Darcy, 2005). Trends indicate volunteer hours per individual are decreasing and this can have significant implications for the successful operation of voluntary sport organizations and the subsequent benefits for participants and the communities in which they operate. This paper extends knowledge of the nature of volunteer engagement in sport by exploring the categorization of sport volunteers as “core” or “peripheral” based on self-reported levels of involvement and commitment within Voluntary Sport Organizations (VSO). Using a survey of 243 sport volunteers across three sports, we identified significant differences between core and peripheral volunteers based on their levels of involvement and commitment in their self-identified primary sport organization roles. Implications of these findings for volunteer recruitment and retention, and for the provision of sport participation opportunities in the community are addressed.

Introduction

The basic premise of this paper is the central and important role of sport volunteers. Without volunteers no sport or sport system is possible. Volunteers are the heart of the wide base of developmental sport and a key factor underpinning the viability of sport events, whether weekly or major competitions. To further understand, develop, and advance the sport system the contribution of volunteers must be nurtured and supported. This paper seeks to extend knowledge of the nature of volunteer engagement in sport and suggest initiatives to enhance the sport volunteer experience.

Understanding the voluntary sport sector and volunteer participation is critically important for the long-term sustainability of most sport delivery systems (Stewart, Nicholson, Smith & Westerbeek, 2004). Stewart et al's. (2004) typology of sport practice suggests that volunteering is a central factor in the operation of all aspects of the national sport systems of westernized democracies and thus provides a key element for all four segments of sport practice: that is, recreational, spontaneous, exercise, and high performance sport. The significance of the volunteer contribution is further emphasized through the policy focus and degree of policy attention on sport and its potential role in delivering a broad range of social goals. Recent reviews of both sport and health policies in Australia (e.g., Australian Sports Commission, 2008a; 2008b; 2009), and amongst most western nations, highlight the importance and contribution of the voluntary sport sector; thereby, providing a focus on the sector as a means to increase participation in sport and physical activity for preventative physical and mental health, amongst a broader set of goals.

Voluntary sport organizations (VSOs) are the community entities that generally are considered to comprise the base of sport delivery systems. In order to analyze volunteers in this study, VSOs were operationally defined as

“nonprofit organizations formally constituted to provide members with opportunities to participate in organized sport and physical activities within particular team or individual sports. VSOs are separate from the state, independently governed and operated by volunteer management committees or boards, and do not return profits to their members” (Cuskelly, Hoye & Auld, 2006, p. 17).

In other words they are non-profit, voluntarily managed and governed, and member-driven. These organizations are populated with human resources who provide their time and labor for the delivery of sport, most often for no remuneration.

Further, in this research sport volunteers were classified as those persons in “roles undertaken to support, arrange and/or run organized sport and physical activity” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002, p.39). The number of these persons, as recent evidence suggests, are not only decreasing but volunteers also exhibit less willingness to engage in certain aspects of volunteering (Engelberg, Skinner & Zakus, 2010). Added to this is evidence that those currently volunteering are contributing less time (as measured by hours per week) to their volunteer activity (Cuskelly, 2005). Evidence derived from a recent sport industry-wide consultation in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) (NSW Department of Sport and Recreation, 2007), as well as other research (Cuskelly, 2005) indicated that volunteer involvement in community sport is decreasing. This is problematic as lower levels of volunteer engagement may constrain the capacity of the voluntary sport sector to sustain national sport delivery systems, deliver more opportunities for participation in organized sport, and achieve other social and health goals.

Two groupings of sport volunteers are typically evident; those who hold managing, governing, or administrative roles and those participating in operational roles such as coaches, team managers, and event organizers. Both sets of roles are integral to the operation of sport clubs and events. Pearce (1993) first coined the term “core” volunteer to describe the involvement and commitment levels of volunteers in non-profit organizations. Cuskelly et al., (2006) applied this conceptualization to sport volunteers and contended that core volunteers usually hold a formal office, often as a board or committee member, are seen as the leaders and typically commit to higher levels of involvement and commitment. A reduction in “core” volunteer (e.g., committee members and administrators) numbers, as noted above, will have significant implications for the effective and efficient functioning of VSOs. Furthermore, a review of organized sport and physical activity involvement between 1996 and 2007 in NSW revealed a general decline in the number of committee members/administrators involved in local community sport clubs, although the numbers of those in predominantly operational roles, such as scorers/timekeepers and medical support volunteers, remained relatively stable or had increased (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004).

This latter group, in contrast, is described as peripheral volunteers. These volunteers tend to commit less time and can be classified as steady or occasional contributors whose involvement and commitment levels are lower than those of core volunteers (Pearce, 1993). However, no previous research has examined the differences between core and peripheral volunteers in sport and how such roles are conceptualized and defined by volunteers.

The key purpose of this paper was to determine how and to what extent sport volunteers identify and categorize themselves as either core or peripheral volunteers, even where they hold multiple roles, a common occurrence in VSOs. Categorization was based on self-reported levels

of involvement and commitment to roles within a VSO. To realize the purpose of the study, three research questions were addressed:

1. To what extent are volunteers involved in a primary and/or secondary VSO volunteer role?;
2. To what extent do involvement and commitment levels in primary roles determine differences between core and peripheral volunteers? and;
3. Are there differences in the demographic and behavioral characteristics of core and peripheral volunteers?

Literature Review

The Size and Importance of the Volunteer Sector in Sport

Volunteers are integral and essential to society and are an especially valuable resource in the sports sector (Rochester, 2006; Sports and Recreation New Zealand, 2006). ‘Voluntary contribution to sport is of such a scale that when quantified it outstrips all other voluntary activity and dwarfs the amount of paid employment in sport’ (Sport England, 2003, p. 2). Volunteerism has reached an extent whereby sport has become dependent on it (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Sport England, 2003). Rochester (2006, p.2) noted that “the great expectations of politicians and policy makers and the rising aspirations of the many organizations which promote volunteering and involve volunteers in their work has been accompanied by a growing research interest”. A number of studies from various countries illustrate the significant contributions volunteers make to the community sport and recreation sector (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Rochester, 2006; Sport England, 2003; Sports and Recreation New Zealand, 2008). While

a comparison of these studies poses questions relating to definitional and methodological differences, their overall findings reinforce the scale and importance of voluntary involvement and commitment on a national and international scale.

Findings from a series of Citizenship Surveys in England between 2001 and 2006 suggested that 76% of those questioned had taken part in some kind of volunteering activity, with 50% of those questioned having been involved in volunteering at least once a month (Rochester, 2006). In 2003, England recorded 5,821,400 sport volunteers, a number which represented nearly 15% of the adult population. These volunteers were noted as contributing over 1.2 billion hours each year to sport, or the equivalent of 720,000 full time paid workers (Sport England, 2003).

In New Zealand, in 2007, over 829,735 members of the population volunteered for a sport or recreation activity, equating to a participation level of 25.3% of the total population. The most popular roles were that of parent helpers and coaches (Sports and Recreation New Zealand, 2008). Of those people who volunteered in the sport and recreation sector, 79% volunteered for a sports club, 36% for a sports team, and 13% for a recreational organization.

A number of other international jurisdictions also exhibited high levels of sport volunteering. For instance, Boraas-White's (2006) research on volunteer activity in the USA revealed that in 2004-2005, three out of ten people participated in some form of volunteering activity, and almost 10% of those volunteers coached, refereed, or supervised sports teams. Similarly, in Canada in 2005, 7% of Canadians were involved in amateur coaching. However, the number of adult Canadians who volunteered as referees, officials, or umpires decreased by 15% to 800,000 in 2005 after peaking at 937,000 in 1998. Furthermore, over two million Canadians volunteered their time as administrators or helpers in amateur sports in 2005 (Ifedi, 2005).

In Australia, the substantial contribution of volunteers is well documented, and the statistics on volunteering demonstrate its importance to governments and national economies (Zakus, 2009). Data indicate that 11% of the adult population aged 18 years and over were involved as volunteers in sport and recreation organizations in 2006. This figure equated to over 1.7 million Australians, with many volunteers involved in more than one role for a sport and recreation organization (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Zakus (2009, pp. 231-232) noted that:

“Volunteers contributed approximately 187 million hours/year in 2006 in one or more sport or recreation organizations. At the current national minimum wage of AUD 14.31, this equates to over AUD 2,676 million. And 84% or 1.4 million did not receive any form of pay or only limited reimbursement for volunteer-related expenses”.

Role, Performance, and Role Theory

Volunteers participate in a diverse range of formally and informally designated roles and positions including coach, manager, committee member or administrator, referee or umpire, scorer, timekeeper, or as a medical support person. Furthermore, many volunteers often have more than one role with data revealing that while about 60% take on one volunteer role, a further 25% are active in two volunteer roles, almost 10% in three and around 5% take responsibility for four or more volunteer positions (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The commitment volunteers make in terms of their time is also substantial. Australian Bureau of Statistics data reveals that 48% of those with a non-playing involvement contribute three hours or less per week, 42% contribute between three to nine hours and a further 7% spend between 10 to 19 hours per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007, p.19).

Some studies suggest that particular roles in an organization are more critical to organizational performance than others (Delery & Shaw, 2001; Emery & Trist, 1969). For instance, Humphrey, Morgeson, and Mannor (2009), suggest that the career experience and job-related skill of strategic core role holders are more strongly related to performance than the experience and job-related skill of non-core role holders. Furthermore, Humphrey et al., (2009) suggest that one or more roles are often more tightly linked to the overall performance of the organization than are other roles. Drawing from team design literatures and the work of Humphrey et al., (2009), core volunteers are more critical for the successful operation of VSOs than peripheral volunteers because they encounter more of the problems that need to be overcome in the organization, have a greater exposure to the tasks that the organization is performing, and are more central to the workflow of the organization. This has significant implications for VSOs facing a trend towards declining numbers of core volunteers. Role theory was utilized to understand why individuals choose to take on (and remain in) roles that are either more central or peripheral to an organization.

Role theory can be considered from two main perspectives. The first approach suggests that roles are situated within social systems and become institutionalized clusters of normative rights and obligations (Linton, 1936). This structural account of roles describes most of everyday activity to be the acting out of socially defined categories (e.g., manager, teacher, coach). These categories carry associated rights and duties that are created by socially based expectations.

The second perspective is a social-psychological approach to “role” based on the traditions of symbolic interactionism (Stryker & Statham, 1985). This approach focuses on the active processes involved in making, taking, and playing at roles, and examines the interactions in which people come to play their roles rather than describing the place of these roles in the

social structure. Here emphasis is on the ways in which people come to take the role of the other, construct their own roles, anticipate the response of others to their roles, and finally play at their particular roles. Sometimes people may embrace their parts fully and play out the details of their role in cherished detail. Therefore, some roles are more intimately linked with a person's sense of identity than others.

Over time, the roles that individuals play can become part of their personal identity, how they see themselves, and how others see them. Through socialization individuals become social identities with recognizable roles to play. Social interactions and settings have a tendency to positively reinforce a person's role, subsequently heightening their role identity and sense of attachment to the role. For example, becoming a socially competent person, someone who fits in, feels at ease with others, and relates to others in socially acceptable ways is a complex task. When this is realized, a greater sense of attachment to the "role" may evolve.

When roles become intimately linked with a sense of identity, individuals may become more involved and committed to their role. For instance, Laverie, and McDonald (2007, p.285) suggested that "dedicated volunteers strongly identify with the organization to which they donate their time and energy". Although, role identity may strengthen a person's commitment and involvement to a role, it may also stem from the social interactions that arise from involvement in and commitment to a role in the first place. Organizational involvement literature can be used to predict volunteer role choice in an organization, and degree of commitment to an organization.

Volunteer Involvement and Commitment

Based on the constructs of behavior, activity, or attitude, the relationship between involvement and commitment has been well explored by social scientists and theorists since the late 1950s and early 1960s (Becker, 1960; Etzioni, 1961; Kanter, 1968; Kelman, 1958). Etzioni

(1961, 1975) conceptualized the term 'involvement' which can be applied to understanding volunteer involvement in VSOs. The macro-organizational theory of involvement proposed by Etzioni also offers a useful way to conceptualize individual's commitment to, and behavior in organizations. Generally, organizational involvement is described as the willingness of a person to engage in activities that are consistent with and support the organization's objectives (Gould, 1979). Drawing on Etzioni's 1961 work, Etzioni and Lehman (1980) proposed three specific types of involvement: moral (strong and positive commitment); alienative (strong and negative commitment); or calculative (weak commitment).

Moral involvement is an acceptance of and identification with organization goals (Etzioni, 1961; 1975). An individual's sense of identification with an organization may influence the extent to which that person becomes involved in the organization and their intention to remain involved (Penley & Gould, 1988). Gould (1979) argued that moral involvement may be most closely related to the concepts of organizational commitment that involves the internalization of organizational roles and values. Similarly, Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982, p.27) suggested that organizational commitment "is the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization". From a volunteer perspective, Laverie and McDonald (2007, p. 285) concluded that "a volunteer's identity supports volunteer behavior to the point of dedication".

Like moral involvement, alienative involvement reflects an affective attachment to the organization, the difference being that alienative involvement exists on the basis of 1) a lack of control over the internal organizational environment, and 2) the perceived absence of alternatives for organizational commitment. This form of involvement is a negative organizational attachment and is associated with situations in which limited intrinsic rewards may be obtained from one's

work (Aiken & Hage, 1966). The lack of control implicit in alienation becomes a perceived inability to change or control the organization which can influence decisions to forfeit (or reduce) organizational involvement. Therefore, those involved in more strategic than operational roles in an organization may have a stronger sense of ability to change or control the organization which, in turn, may influence their involvement in and commitment to the organization. Furthermore, Blauner (1964) linked alienation with conditions of meaninglessness, powerlessness, self-estrangement, and social isolation. On the basis of motivations for volunteer participation, these conditions could significantly alter a volunteer's decision to begin or continue involvement. For example, Phillips, Little, and Goodine (2002) identified that meaningful volunteer experiences were an important factor in volunteer retention, and Davies (1998) argued that a number of "generic" motives influence volunteer involvement including social contact, having a sense of accomplishment, self expression, and personal enrichment.

Etzioni and Lehman's (1980) third type of involvement, calculative involvement, describes an individual's involvement in an organization based on the individual receiving inducements to match contributions. This form of organizational attachment is based on an exchange process and is conceptually rooted in March and Simon's (1958) exchange theory. The "exchange process" can be responsible for behavioral intentions and ultimately behavior, which is closely associated with retention of organizational membership (Penley & Gould, 1988). This may explain an individual's intensity of involvement to their role. An individual may devote greater energies and commitment to the organization if inducements for role participation increase. From a sport volunteer perspective these inducements may include personal and social rewards such as gaining work experience, tapping into community networks, and recognition rewards and incentives. In the field of volunteer motivation, Knoke and Prensky (1984) described

this as a utilitarian (or material) incentive aligned with self-interest and the personal benefits gained from volunteering. Other forms of motivation (affective and normative) and their association with involvement and commitment are described in the following paragraphs.

The organizational involvement literature can be used to predict role choice and continued participation (retention) in an organization. It is also instrumental for understanding the degree of commitment to an organization (Etzioni, 1961; Gould, 1979). Organizational commitment can be described as a behavior, or affective response to the organization, that depends on what the organization means personally to the individual and the individual's perceptions of the values and ideology which may be actualized through participation in the organization. Kelman (1958) proposed that commitment results from one of three processes: compliance (in order to gain reward or avoid punishment), identification (to develop or maintain a satisfying relationship), and internalization (because there is congruence between the individual's value system and the induced behavior). Other theorists (e.g., Penley & Gould, 1988) used Etzioni's three dimensions of involvement to explain organizational attachment as a form of affective commitment (based on moral and alienative involvement) or instrumental commitment (based on calculative involvement).

On the one hand, organizational commitment is conceptualized as a form of affective attachment to an organization, characterized by Buchanan (1974) as a sense of identification, involvement and loyalty to an organization or to a role within an organization. Because of this affective form of organizational attachment, a person may remain highly committed to an organization even when inducements diminish. In sport volunteering, affective commitment may stem from an affective incentive (such as the social benefits associated with interpersonal relationships, group identification and group status) that serves to motivate many sport volunteers

and influence involvement and retention (Knoke & Prenskey, 1984). Affective incentives are different to normative incentives which align with altruism as a motive for volunteering.

On the other hand, instrumental sources of commitment refer to a bond that develops between the organization and an individual as a result of the exchange process – when an individual exchanges his or her contributions for the inducements provided by the organization. Penley and Gould (1988, p. 44) described that the extent of the instrumental commitment depends on the “intensity of the bond, and the intensity of the bond depends on the degree to which an employee’s intentions to behave are consistent with the organization’s behavioral demands”. Meyer and Allen (1997) further advanced the conceptualization of organizational commitment by proposing a three-component model including affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment. From their perspective, affective commitment refers to how individuals want to become committed to an organization because of the strength of identification with and involvement in the organization. Continuance commitment develops from a lack of alternatives or the potential loss of positive benefits if one was to leave an organization. Finally, normative commitment is based on socialization, organizational investment, and the strength of reciprocity norm.

Overall, the various components of commitment relate to different reasons for becoming committed to an organization. Catano, Pond and Kelloway (2001, p.256) acknowledged the “many factors which can influence whether individuals join a voluntary organization, or once they have joined, actively assume leadership roles and participate fully in the life of the organization”. These factors can determine the difference between volunteer involvement and volunteer commitment. Clearly, there is conceptual alignment between the volunteer motivations or incentives described earlier (affective, utilitarian, and normative) and the three-component

model of organizational commitment (affective, continuance, normative, respectively) which may explain why some volunteers decide to stay with a VSO while others leave. For example, Cuskelly, et al (2006, p. 91) argued that “volunteers motivated by utilitarian incentives are likely to develop a stronger sense of continuance commitment than volunteers motivated by normative or affective incentives”.

Another important theoretical model of volunteers is that of Robert Stebbins in particular the concept of “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 1992, 1996, 1997). Stebbins (2001: 3) indicated that:

“serious leisure is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centred on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience”.

Such volunteer work demands sustained, positive commitment that leads to “career volunteering”. In the sample and the cases studied here, a clear demarcation was evident in the career, serious-leisurists and those not on boards (cf. Engelberg, et al., 2010).

The interactions between involvement, commitment, and motivation are complex. Balduck, Van Rossem, and Buelens (2009) suggested that volunteers having a strong commitment to an organization displayed an increase in their active involvement (for example, donating hours, attending meetings, serving on committees, and/or making financial contributions to the organization). Therefore, the concept of organizational commitment helps explain involvement in (level of involvement and duration of involvement) and attachment to social organizations as well as the development of organizational commitment.

In summary, volunteer involvement and commitment can be described on the basis of individual behaviors and attitudes to volunteering, and are mutually dependent concepts that act to reinforce one-another through processes of satisfaction and retention. However, the application of involvement and commitment concepts to core and peripheral volunteer roles in VSOs has not been previously explored. This study progresses knowledge in this area by identifying the nature and extent of core and peripheral volunteer involvement and commitment to VSOs.

Within VSOs, the commitment of core volunteers and the extent to which they are satisfied with volunteer experiences is particularly important for organizational effectiveness and stability. Cuskelly, et al (2006, p. 90) suggested that “organizational commitment provides a basis for understanding the linkages that develop between volunteers and VSOs and it is both a factor in the retention of volunteers and, to some extent, their performance”. However, it should be noted that while a high level of commitment can result in more loyalty, increased teamwork, reduced turnover and absence, along with a greater sense of self-worth, dignity, psychological involvement, and feeling of being integral to the organization, there is no clear link to performance (Arnold, Robertson & Cooper, 1991; Bishop, Scott & Burroughs, 1997).

The present study uses self-reported levels of involvement and commitment within VSOs as a basis for categorizing sport volunteers as “core” or “peripheral”. This research contributes to the relatively unexplored area of core and peripheral volunteer roles in social organizations by first identifying the extent to which volunteers are involved in a primary and/or secondary VSO volunteer role; second, by examining the extent to which involvement and commitment levels in primary roles determine differences between core and peripheral volunteers; and, third, by examining the extent to which there are differences in the demographic and behavioral characteristics of core and peripheral volunteers. By further understanding the nature of volunteer

involvement and commitment, the reasons that volunteers choose to take on certain roles and why they behave as they do within VSO settings can be better enunciated.

Method

To address the three research questions, a sample of volunteers drawn from three state sporting organizations, from metropolitan and regional NSW, was surveyed. All research was conducted in accordance with human research ethics approval through Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. The following sections describe the sampling of participants, development of the survey instrument, and the collection procedures and analysis techniques employed.

Participants

The sampling frame comprised volunteers from local community sport clubs involving three sports. The sport organizations were selected in consultation with the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation and represented a broadly representative cross-section of male and female dominated sports, inner and outer metropolitan centers and regional areas, summer and winter sports, team and individual sports, and large and small sports (determined by the total number of participants).

The sample was drawn from volunteer members of VSOs formally affiliated with each of the three selected sports who agreed to an invitation from their respective State Sport Organization (SSO) to participate in the study. A final sample of 243 volunteers was derived from a total of 632 possible volunteers initially invited to participate (see procedures) realising a final response rate of 38%. The study participants were predominantly from the Sydney (capital

city) metropolitan area (58%), with smaller proportions from other metropolitan centers (15%), and rural areas (26%).

The average age of respondents was 43.2 (SD = 9.0) years, 58% were male, and 81.5% described themselves as employed outside the home. Of those employed, 30% were managers or administrators, 24% professional or para-professional, and 16% clerical, service or sales worker. This sample was very representative of the national population in terms of sport volunteers. For instance, Australian statistics on sport volunteers indicate that 61% of sport volunteers are male, compared to 58% in this study (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

Survey Instrument

A self-administered survey instrument was designed and developed for the purpose of this study to collect data regarding self-reported volunteer involvement, commitment and roles as well as selected demographic characteristics. Commitment and involvement were of primary interest and were operationalized using seven statements developed from the literature and in consultation with representatives of the three SSOs involved in the study. The seven survey items developed, aimed to capture the perceived levels of volunteer involvement and commitment to their VSO, to their role within it, as well as their perceived level of participation in planning, decision making, and service delivery. Organizational commitment and involvement scales such as the organizational commitment questionnaire (Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1979; Porter, Steers, Mowday & Boulian, 1974) and the three component instrument developed by Meyer and Allen (1997) were considered inappropriate for measuring these constructs with volunteers as they were quite complex, solely developed for work organizations and included a large number of items.

To deal with these difficulties, Engelberg (2008) developed and tested a questionnaire constructed specifically for the sport volunteer sector. Three types of commitment and three targets of that commitment were tested. Engelberg's initial study and the adaptation of the questionnaires for further use in her dissertation revealed good reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha of .91 for the total scale and of .82, .89, and .76 for the three subscales) and intercorrelations between the scales and background variables of the volunteers. This provides support for the scale implemented in this study.

Volunteer involvement and commitment were measured using a 4 point unidirectional Likert-type scale which range from "low" to "very high". The internal consistency of the involvement and commitment scale was high with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = .92$) for the seven items used in the scale.

Other survey items gathered demographic data (e. g., age, sex, employment, and education), volunteers' perceived primary and secondary roles within their VSO, as well as the number of years and average hours per week they contributed to these roles. The survey instrument was piloted among nine experts in the field, including the project managers, researchers, and sport representatives (e. g., including Chief Executive Officers, Coaching and Development Officers, VSO Presidents and Secretaries) to identify possible problems of ambiguity with instrument wording and to assess survey completion time.

Procedures

Representatives of the three identified SSOs recruited volunteers to participate in the study. Each SSO contacted volunteers listed on their respective organizational and member databases via e-mail to explain the purpose and procedures of the study to seek their

participation. Of the 632 SSO contacts the sample of 243 (38%) consented to receive the survey, while only 13 declined to participate.

The sample that consented to have their e-mail addresses provided to the research team and participate in the study were e-mailed an invitation to complete an on-line survey. An incentive and follow-up strategies recommended by Dillman (2000) were used to enhance the response rate. Participants had four weeks to complete the survey. The first follow-up email was sent to participants ten days after the initial distribution. The final follow-up email was sent to participants one week before the survey closed.

Data Analysis

Data were translated from the on-line survey database to an SPSS data file and analyzed using SPSS descriptives, crosstabs (chi square), t-test, and cluster analysis. Because the primary purpose of the study was to examine differences between core and peripheral volunteers, hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's method was applied to the involvement and commitment scale item data. The purpose of the cluster analysis was to identify relatively homogeneous and exclusive groups of volunteers based on their self-reported levels of involvement and commitment. Cluster analysis was used to statistically maximize group differences between mean involvement and commitment scores for core and peripheral volunteers. Ward's method of hierarchical agglomerative clustering using standardized Z-scores and squared Euclidian distances was applied to identify group differences. This method was selected to minimize within-cluster differences and to avoid problems with "chaining" of observations found in the single linkage method (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998). As Ward's method is sensitive to outliers, Z-scores for the VMI dimensions were checked for outlying cases (more than three standard deviations from the mean) prior to cluster analysis. A

drawback of cluster analysis is the lack of a standard or objective procedure to determine the final number of clusters to be formed. Hair et al., (1998, p. 503) argued that large increases in the agglomeration coefficient “have been shown to be a fairly accurate algorithm”.

Results

Primary and Secondary Volunteer Roles

Research question one sought to identify the extent to which volunteers were involved in a primary and/or secondary role in a VSO. The primary and secondary volunteer roles reported by the survey respondents are summarized in Table 1. A majority of the survey respondents (85%) reported that they were involved in their VSO both in a primary and a secondary volunteer role. Of the 16 roles listed in the survey, the most frequently reported roles overall were Secretary (40.8%), Trainer/Instructor/Teacher/ Coach (36%), and President or Chair (30.4%).

When the total responses were then broken down into either primary or secondary roles it was quite evident that President or Chair and Secretary were more likely to be reported as the primary volunteer role (26% and 34% of respondents respectively) than were more operational roles such as Trainer/Instructor/Teacher/Coach. These latter role types were categorized by a larger proportion of respondents as their secondary (22.7%) rather than as their primary role (13.3%). Similarly, roles such as official/referee/umpire (total 16.3%) and team manager (total 15%) were amongst the more frequently listed roles but were most likely to be perceived as secondary (13% and 9% respectively) by respondents.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The respondents were also asked to identify the nature and degree of their involvement in their primary and secondary volunteer roles in the club. Providing further support to the notion of distinct primary and secondary roles, volunteers contributed significantly more *hours* per week as well as more *years* in their primary roles, compared to their secondary roles (chi square (df 6) = 33.9, $p < .001$). Volunteers were more likely to report contributing more than 5 hours per week (52%) to their primary roles compared to their secondary roles in which only 20% of volunteers contributed more than 5 hours per week. Significant associations were also evident between the *years* volunteers had been involved in their primary and secondary roles (chi square (df 9) = 123.0, $p < .001$), although the patterns were different to hours contributed per week. Volunteers who had spent more years in their primary role were also more likely to have spent more years in their secondary role (tables not shown).

Cluster Analysis

The second research question focussed on whether volunteer self-reported involvement and commitment levels in their primary roles would further differentiate between core and peripheral volunteers. The mean scores for the variables used to categorise the survey respondents as either core or peripheral volunteers are displayed in Table 2. Scores on each item ranged from 1 “Low” to 4 “Very high”. In comparison to peripheral volunteers, core volunteers were more highly involved and committed and made greater contributions to planning, decision making, and “hands on” work within their clubs in their primary volunteer role. Not surprisingly, given that the function of cluster analysis is to statistically maximise group differences, there were significant differences between the core and peripheral volunteer groups (Wilks’ Lambda (7,231) = 80.25 $p < .001$). Significant differences between core and peripheral volunteers were also identified for each of the seven variables used in the cluster analysis procedure (see Table 2).

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The third research question sought to identify whether differences in demographic and behavioral characteristics of core and peripheral volunteers would support the differentiation of roles. Differences between core and peripheral volunteers were examined by testing for between group differences based on demographics, primary role, as well as hours and years of participation. There were no significant differences between core and peripheral volunteers based on their gender, age, current employment status, or highest level of educational attainment.

Before testing for significant differences between core and peripheral volunteers in terms of their primary volunteer role, those roles with a frequency of less than 10 cases were recoded as “other”. There were significant differences (Chi square (df 4) = 31.3, $p < .01$) between core and peripheral volunteers in what they self-reported as their primary role (see Table 3). Core volunteers were more likely to report VSO board positions such as president or chair (35.3%) or secretary (38.3%) than to report operational positions such as team manager (2.8%) or trainer/instructor/teacher/coach (6.4%).

In contrast, peripheral volunteers reported their primary role predominantly as an operational one, such as team manager (10.2%), trainer/instructor/teacher/coach (22.4%), or other (25.5%). In summary, core volunteers were more likely (74%) to identify a leadership or policy role (president, chair, or secretary) than were peripheral volunteers, who more likely identified (58.1%) holding an operational or helping roles in their VSO including team manager, trainer/instructor/teacher/coach or other (see Table 3).

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Hours per week

The self-reported hours per week that volunteers contributed to both their primary and secondary roles are summarised in Tables 4 and 5. In the primary role there were significant differences (chi square (df 2) = 38.8 $p < .001$) in the hours contributed per week between core and peripheral volunteers. Amongst the core volunteers there was a relatively even distribution of hours contributed (31.9 to 34.8%). In contrast, peripheral volunteers were much more likely to contribute up to 5 hours per week (71.4%) than they were to contribute more than 10 hours per week (8.2%) (see Table 4). Similarly there were significant differences in the hours per week contributed by core and peripheral volunteers (chi square (df 2) = 19.9 $p < .001$). Core volunteers were five times more likely than peripheral volunteers to contribute more than 5 hours per week (30.3% v 6.0%) to their secondary role whereas peripheral volunteers were twice as likely to contribute less than one hour per week (10.7%) than were core volunteers (4.1%) (see Table 5). Overall, it appears that core volunteers contribute significantly more hours per week than peripheral volunteers to both their primary and secondary volunteer roles.

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Years involved

Data for years of involvement in primary and secondary roles were also tested for differences between core and peripheral volunteers (tables not shown). There were no significant differences between core and peripheral volunteers in the years they had been involved in either

their primary or secondary roles. Similarly, there were no significant differences between core and peripheral volunteers in terms of the years they had been a member of their VSO or the years they had been involved in their sport. These findings may indicate similar patterns of retention between core and peripheral volunteers. However, the majority of volunteers (more than 60%) reported involvement of five years or less in both primary and secondary roles. From another perspective almost two-thirds of VSO volunteers continue in their primary or secondary roles for five or less years irrespective of being categorised as a core or peripheral volunteer.

In summary, a majority of survey respondents (85%) were involved in their VSO both in a primary and a secondary volunteer role. Board roles (president, chair, secretary) were more likely to be reported as the primary volunteer role rather than operational type roles (e.g., trainer, teacher, coach). However, operational roles were reported by a larger proportion of respondents as their secondary rather than their primary role. Overall, volunteers contributed significantly more hours per week to their primary role than to their secondary role.

Findings also indicate that volunteer involvement and commitment levels in primary roles can be used to classify volunteers as core or peripheral volunteers. Significant differences between core and peripheral volunteers were identified for level of involvement and level of commitment in primary volunteer role and club, contributions to decision making and planning in the club, and practical work done in the club. Core volunteers were significantly more involved and committed to their primary roles than were peripheral volunteers. They also made greater contributions to planning, decision making, and hands on work within their clubs in their primary role. As such, core volunteers were more likely to be involved in a leadership or policy role (e.g., board positions) than an operational position, whereas peripheral volunteers were more likely to hold operational roles.

Finally, no significant differences were found between core and peripheral volunteers based on demographic characteristics including gender, age, current employment status, or highest level of educational attainment. However, significant differences were found between core and peripheral volunteers in terms of behavioral characteristics such as hours contributed to volunteering. The following section will address the practical and theoretical significance of these findings for volunteer involvement in non-profit sport.

Discussion

The overall objective of this study was to examine the perceptions of sport volunteers in relation to the nature and extent to which they categorized themselves as either core or peripheral volunteers. While all roles filled by volunteers are integrally important, there are differences in involvement, commitment, and output in each of the above types. Three research questions were addressed and the findings relevant to each of these will be discussed in turn.

Involvement in Primary and Secondary VSO Volunteer Roles

The data clearly revealed that many volunteers are involved in multiple roles in VSOs. However, respondents were able to clearly distinguish between what constituted their primary and secondary roles. Importantly, in terms of distinguishing between core and peripheral volunteers, respondents tended to identify roles such as President or Chair and Secretary as their primary role rather than more operational level activities such as Trainer/Instructor or Coach. Furthermore, congruent with the self reported categorizations outlined above, volunteers also indicated that more hours per week were contributed to those roles perceived as primary in nature compared to those categorized as secondary.

Commitment Levels and Core and Peripheral Volunteers

The cluster analysis revealed that core volunteers tended to be more highly involved and committed to both the more specific elements of volunteering (i.e., with their sport club) as well as the broader and typically longer term elements of their generic overall volunteer experience than were peripheral volunteers. This behavior was manifested across different levels of volunteering in VSOs including not only management and governance roles in such areas as organizational planning and decision making, but also operational level work. However, as indicated above, core volunteers were more likely to identify the management and governance activities as their primary function.

Demographic and Behavioral Differences between Core and Peripheral Volunteers

The analysis indicated that there were no significant differences in key demographic characteristics between core and peripheral volunteers. Importantly, the results suggested there were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of the years they had been involved in either their primary or secondary roles, with the majority of volunteers reporting involvement of five years or less in both primary and secondary roles. This is a key finding as it suggests that core volunteering is not 'evolutionary' in nature and/or necessarily a natural consequence of longer periods of engagement with the organization or socialization. Furthermore, this finding implies that some individuals may come to the initial volunteer experience more disposed and/or willing to commit. For example, the social-psychological approach to understanding roles suggests that some roles are more strongly associated with a person's sense of identity than others. In addition, the core or peripheral volunteer behavior may be a function of any previous volunteer experience and this issue also warrants further investigation.

As may be expected, given the higher level of engagement expected of leadership roles in management and governance, core volunteers contributed more hours per week than peripheral volunteers to their primary roles. Engelberg (2008) noted that “committee members were significantly more committed to their role than volunteers in other roles” (p. 114), which also emanated from a similar behavior of a larger time commitment. However, core volunteers also contributed more hours per week to their secondary roles underlining the overall greater level of organizational engagement and commitment exhibited by core volunteers. The results confirm Pearce’s (1993) finding that core volunteers contribute significantly more hours per week than peripheral volunteers in both primary and secondary roles.

The key issue for VSOs is how to better engage their volunteers such that more peripheral volunteers are converted into core volunteers. VSOs rely on relatively high levels of volunteer involvement and are likely to be affected by the trends towards declining volunteer numbers. Furthermore, with lesser hours and fewer years of experience, the knowledge and “informational disadvantage which may affect their understanding of procedures, organizational issues and priorities” (Engelberg, et al., 2010) will likewise affect the efficiency and effectiveness of voluntary management. Therefore, given the trend towards volunteers contributing fewer hours, a lower conversion rate of core to peripheral volunteering not only has implications for VSOs in terms of capacity derived from hours of volunteer work but also the quality of VSO services as peripheral volunteers are likely to have only a superficial understanding of VSO operations due to less exposure to organizational issues, tasks and workflow.

This may also have liability implications. The literature supports the notion that certain organizational roles are more critical to organizational performance than others (Delery & Shaw, 2001; Emery & Trist, 1969; Humphrey et al., 2009). Humphrey et al., (2009), suggested that core

volunteers are more critical for the successful operation of VSOs than peripheral volunteers because they encounter more of the problems that need to be overcome in the organization, have a greater exposure to the tasks that the organization is performing, and are more central to the workflow of the organization. Furthermore, the results suggest that given that most respondents first identified a core function as their primary role and yet also identified secondary peripheral roles that more is being done by fewer volunteers thus placing more stress on these valuable people. Other research (e.g., Taylor, Darcy, Hoye & Cuskelly, 2006) has suggested that workload issues (largely under the control of VSOs) play a significant role in the decision of volunteers to leave but such concerns may also be relevant in the peripheral to core conversion process. This issue also needs more research; that is, not just focusing research on the decision to leave or stay but the decision to maintain involvement at the peripheral level rather than 'stepping up' to a core level of commitment.

But questions remain as to what extent conversion from peripheral to core volunteering behavior is a function of either: interactions between the volunteer and the organization, the personal attributes/dispositions (including previous volunteer experiences) of the volunteers, or some combination of both.

Conclusion

This research contributes to a better understanding of the differences between core and peripheral sport volunteers and how these differences emerge through role differentiation. Knowing whether or not there are sufficient differences between core and peripheral volunteer involvement in, and commitment to, VSOs can assist the development of recruitment strategies and volunteer management methods designed to better target each type of volunteer.

Furthermore, a better understanding of the roles fulfilled by core and peripheral volunteers and the nature of their involvement and commitment is essential to protect and develop the role of this vital group of people who form the foundation of a cohesive network enabling sports clubs to deliver services to its members, sustain the sport system, and consequentially build social capital.

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Table 1: Primary and secondary VSO volunteer roles

	Primary volunteer role %	Secondary volunteer role %	Total %
President or chair	26.1	4.3	30.4
Secretary	34.0	6.8	40.8
Treasurer	2.5	1.0	3.5
Registrar	3.7	1.4	5.1
Volunteer coordinator	0.8	3.9	4.7
Competition/event coordinator	2.1	4.3	6.4
Ground coordinator/marshal	-	1.9	1.9
Team manager	5.8	9.2	15.0
Trainer/instruct/teacher/coach	13.3	22.7	36.0
Official/referee/umpire	3.7	12.6	16.3
Time keeper/scorer	2.9	7.2	10.1
Medical support person	1.2	3.4	4.6
Marketing/PR/news/fund raiser	1.7	6.3	8.0
Canteen and bar	-	2.9	2.9
General help	1.7	8.7	10.4
Other	0.4	3.4	3.8
Total	100.0	100.0	200.0
Number of cases	241	207	

Table 2: Mean scores (and standard deviation) for core and peripheral volunteer categories on variables used in cluster analysis (Ward's method).

Level of	Core volunteers	Peripheral volunteers	Univariate <i>F</i> (1,237)
Involvement in primary volunteer role	3.79 (0.44)	2.86 (0.41)	144.9*
Involvement in club	3.82 (0.41)	2.73 (0.74)	209.8*
Commitment to primary volunteer role	3.76 (0.44)	3.04 (0.70)	95.9*
Commitment to club	3.80 (0.42)	2.91 (0.73)	142.7*
Contribution to decision making in the club	3.79 (0.41)	2.31 (0.77)	373.7*
Contribution to planning in the club	3.77 (0.44)	2.22 (0.79)	368.6*
Practical (hands-on) work done in the club	3.89 (0.32)	2.81 (0.82)	201.2*
Total	100%	100%	
Number of cases	141	98	

* $p < .001$

Table 3: Differences between core and peripheral volunteers by primary volunteer role.

	Core %	Peripheral %
President or chair	35.3	13.3
Secretary	38.3	26.8
Team manager	2.8	10.2
Trainer/instruct/teacher/coach	6.4	22.4
Other	17.0	25.5
Total	100.0	100.0
Number of cases	141	98

Chi square (*df* 4) = 31.3, *p* < .01

Table 4: Hours per week in primary volunteer role by core and peripheral volunteer category.

Hours per week	Core %	Peripheral %
Up to 5 hours	31.9	71.4
6 to 10 hours	34.8	20.4
More than 10 hours	33.3	8.2
Total	100%	100%
Number of cases	141	98

Chi square (*df* 2) = 38.8 *p* < .001

Table 5: Hours per week in secondary volunteer role by core and peripheral volunteer category.

Hours per week	Core %	Peripheral %
Up to 5 hours	4.1	10.7
6 to 10 hours	65.6	83.3
More than 10 hours	30.3	6.0
Total	100%	100%
Number of cases	122	84

Chi square (*df* 2) = 19.9 *p* < .001