Exploring the commitment of volunteers in Little Athletics centres

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ABSTRACT

The organisational commitment of volunteers has been identified as a key factor affecting the organisation and delivery of community-based sport. However, research has primarily focussed on commitment to the whole organisation overlooking the fact that volunteers can develop commitments to various organisational targets. In this study we drew on Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) general model of commitment to assess the commitment of volunteers in Little Athletics centres in NSW to three targets: the centre, the work team, and the volunteering role. An examination of the intercorrelations amongst the targets of commitment indicated that the various commitment constructs were distinguishable. Commitment also differed according to variables such as volunteer age, number of children enrolled and role held within the centre. Consistent with Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) conceptualisation of commitment, these findings indicate that volunteers may hold differing commitments to targets other than the sporting organisation. Future research should focus on exploring the relationship between targets of commitment and outcomes such as volunteer retention and performance. Practical implications are also addressed.

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, volunteers are the key human resources of many community-based sporting organisations. Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2001) data showed that, of the 4.4 million people who undertook voluntary work in 2000, sports organisations received the help of 1.1 million adults. Volunteers are thus an important set of human resources that are essential for the day-to-day running and long-term existence of sport organisations.

Research on volunteers' motives for volunteering has focused on the issue of recruitment but little is known about how volunteers behave once they have joined (Pearce 1993). Knoke and Prensky (1984) identify three main incentives that drive people to become volunteers: (1) utilitarian, (2) affective, and (3) normative. Utilitarian incentives include volunteering to improve or acquire skills/knowledge/experience. A parent who serves in his or her child's sports club also derives utilitarian benefits: enabling the child to participate in the sport. The benefits of social contact can be the main source of attraction for other volunteers, even if the key purpose of the organisation is utilitarian. Affective incentives include enjoyment of other people's company, or the sharing of common experiences. Finally, normative incentives are reflected in the need to do a good deed and the satisfaction derived from helping others (Chelladurai 1999). The achievement of organisational goals is usually quite central to the normatively driven volunteer. It is not unusual for these volunteers to want to feel that their efforts are effective, particularly those in more formal roles (Pearce 1993).

Pearce (1993) suggested that service-related motives and goal-oriented motives may not remain as attractive with the passing of time. She believes

that in the absence of commitment to other individuals in the organisation (the social aspect), goal-attracted individuals are likely to find alternative ways of goal attainment that emphasise assisting people over the organisation.

The organisational commitment of volunteers has been recognised as critical to the effective organisation and delivery of community-based sport (Cuskelly, McIntyre & Boag 1998). Committed individuals are believed to participate wholeheartedly in organisational activities, thereby contributing to organisational goals and success, and simultaneously enjoy an enhanced sense of wellbeing (Chelladurai 1999). Nonprofit organisations, including sporting organisations, have key challenges to face, one of which is volunteer retention (Cuskelly 2004). According to ABS figures (2002) there was a decrease of approximately 17% in participation rates in non-playing roles (these roles include refereeing, umpiring and coaching) between 1997 and 2001. The declining number of volunteers has meant that those volunteers who are left are burdened with more work. For example, ABS (1999) figures show that almost 60% of all volunteer hours were contributed by only 2.5% of the population, who volunteered on average for more than 300 hours over the year.

Retention is not the only issue many organisations have to face. Anecdotal evidence in junior sporting organisations, such as the Little Athletics Association of New South Wales (LAANSW), suggests that many volunteering roles are not being fulfilled. Many centre administrators complain that parents are reluctant to remain and serve as volunteers on committees, whilst other centres have an urgent need for officials, such as age marshals (S. Strong, personal communication, 28 March 2004). In North Queensland, regional development officers in Soccer Queensland have recently noted difficulties in relation to the retention of coaches for the junior leagues (D. Abela, personal communication, 15 May 2005).

Volunteer performance is also a key priority. As Pearce (1993) noted 'complaints about work performance of volunteers are frequent enough that the matter deserves serious attention' (p. 84). Paull (1998; 2000) also stressed the importance of volunteer performance, noting that 'a volunteer who is not performing to the standard required by the organisation poses a problem for the volunteer co-ordinator or manager' (1998, p. 25). Given these concerns, the study of commitment appears to be a worthwhile endeavour, in particular as there is considerable research evidence supporting the link between organisational commitment and various aspects of organisational success (Meyer & Allen 1997).

Research on organisational commitment has primarily focused on the situation of paid workers (Allen & Meyer 2000; Meyer & Allen 1997; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch & Topolnytsky 2002; Mowday, Porter & Steers 1982). Volunteer situations differ from that of paid workers in that volunteers are not financially dependent on organisational rewards. Pearce (1993) stated that this creates conditions of normative uncertainty, where social expectations and organisational values are less defined as they are for the remunerated worker. This allows volunteers a degree of individual independence and freedom, where their own psychological states should have a greater influence on their behaviour.

Attempts to extend organisational commitment research to volunteer-run organisations have been comparatively limited. Volunteer populations that have been studied have included fundraising workers (Dailey 1986), technical army personnel (Dornstein & Matalon 1989), crisis centre workers (Brown & Zahrly 1990), museum workers (Edwards

2004) and board members of chambers of commerce (Dawley, Stephens & Stephens 2005; Preston & Brown 2004). In sport specifically, Cuskelly (1995) and work with his colleagues (e.g. Cuskelly & Boag 2001; Cuskelly, Boag & McIntyre 1999; Cuskelly et al. 1998) has contributed to the understanding of the organisational commitment of volunteers. Their research has extended the applicability of the organisational commitment framework to the sporting volunteer context. It assessed key antecedents that impact on the development of organisational commitment (such as personal and structural characteristics), work experience variables, behavioural involvement, the changing motivations of volunteers across time, and their impact on organisational commitment. In terms of outcomes of organisational commitment, Cuskelly and colleagues examine one key outcome, volunteer retention; an outcome that is considered to be central to the success of sporting organisations (Chelladurai 1999).

Despite this progress in the understanding of the organisational commitment of sporting volunteers and volunteers in general, some important issues remain unexplored: what is the nature of volunteer organisational commitment; what do volunteers become committed to; and what are the implications of this commitment?

According to Meyer and Herscovitch (2001, p. 301) 'commitment is a force that binds the individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more targets'. This force is experienced as a 'mind-set' that guides the individual's subsequent behaviour (such as, but not limited to, staying in the organisation). This recent conceptualisation, based upon an earlier framework by Meyer and Allen (1997), acknowledges that individuals may develop commitments to targets or foci other than the organisation as a whole (Becker 1992; Reichers 1985). Becker (1992) suggested that conceptualisations and measures of commitment should be revised to take into account these other foci. For example, individuals can be committed to their occupation or their work team. These different commitments are believed to interact and shape an individual's overall commitment profile (Cohen 2003). Adopting a multiple commitment framework has been seen to add value to the concept of commitment and to its predictive power (Cohen 2003). For example, Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993) found that high occupational commitment, but not high organisational commitment, was related to occupational-specific activity (such as attending courses). In the volunteer context, although it is recognised that retention is a key outcome, there are other desirable outcomes to be pursued. These may include performance, participation in organisational activities, participation in training courses, and fulfilment of specific roles, amongst others. These outcomes may be related to target-specific commitments.

Meyer and Allen's (1991; 1997) and Meyer & Herscovitch's (2001) conceptualisations also incorporate three dimensions of commitment.

- 1. Affective commitment is an attachment based on 'desire', i.e., the individual remains in the organisation because he or she *wants to*.
- 2. Continuance commitment is an attachment based on 'perceived cost', i.e., the individual remains in the organisation because he or she perceives that benefits (such as pay or status) can be lost upon leaving the organisation. This individual remains in the organisation because he or she *needs to*.
- 3. Normative commitment is an attachment based on a feeling of obligation, i.e., the individual remains in the organisation because of a feeling that he or she *ought to*.

Although the relevance of these three dimensions of commitment to the volunteer experience has yet to be firmly established, we chose to focus on the affective dimension because of its clear application to the volunteer situation (Dawley et al. 2005).

The purpose of this study is to explore the commitment of volunteers in a communitybased sporting organisation, Little Athletics Centres. Specifically, it seeks to explore the relevance of the affective commitment construct to targets other than the sporting organisation. The literature on multiple commitments indicates that, in addition to organisational commitment, the work group (or team) commitment and job-related commitments may be important work-related targets (Cohen 2003). Drawing on the literature on the commitment of volunteers, which suggests that both the social aspects of the experience of volunteering, and the positive perception of making a meaningful contribution to the organisation are key determinants of commitment (Pearce 1993), two targets were selected: the work group (commitment to the team of volunteers) and the role(s) undertaken (commitment to the volunteer role). A secondary purpose of this paper is to explore key demographic characteristics of Little Athletics volunteers and how these relate to the commitment targets selected. Participants were recruited from Little Athletics centres in New South Wales (NSW). Little Athletics centres provide modified track and field activities and competition for children aged between 3 and 15 years. A volunteer committee runs each centre and all activities are conducted and supervised by volunteers who fulfil the roles of, for example, coaches, officials, and timekeepers.

METHOD

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

The data for this study were collected during the LAANSW Regional (Region 3) Championships. Twenty-seven centres (of a total of 197 NSW Centres) were represented at this meet. The respondents were drawn from Region 3, which comprises four geographical zones covering most of metropolitan Sydney. Event managers estimated volunteer attendance to be 250 individuals. Potential respondents were approached in their respective centre enclosures by the researcher who explained the purpose of the research, showed them an explanatory letter, and requested their cooperation (questionnaire completion and return). One hundred and nine volunteers completed and returned questionnaires, which represents a response rate of approximately 44%.

The final sample comprised 62 women and 47 men. Ten percent of these were aged between 25 and 34 years, 57 % were aged between 35 and 44 years, 26% were aged between 45 and 55 years, and 7% were 55 years old and over. Experience (defined as number of seasons as a Little Athletics centre volunteer) ranged between one season and four or more seasons with nearly 60% having volunteered for 4 or more seasons. Seventeen percent had no children currently enrolled at their respective centres; of those who had children currently enrolled, over half had two children at the centre. Volunteers served a variety of roles within their respective centres: nearly half (49%) were committee members, of the remaining half, more than half were age marshals (appointed season officials for their respective age categories, e.g. U8 boys) and those remaining fulfilled a variety of centre roles, both casual (e.g. canteen helper) and regular (e.g. time keeper; first aid officer).

MEASURES

Questionnaire construction. Meyer and Allen's (1991; 1997) organisational commitment scales are used for assessing organisational commitment in paid-worker settings. As such, the original wording reflects the situation of this type of worker. Since the purpose of this study was to measure commitment to the athletics centre, the word 'organisation' was replaced by 'centre' and the wording of other items was also adapted (e.g. 'volunteering' for 'working'). New items were written in such a way as to retain the main terminology used by Meyer and Allen (e.g. 'This centre has a great deal of personal meaning for me').

Organisational commitment (or commitment to the Little Athletics Centre) was defined as a desire to belong to and a feeling of attachment to the centre. Five items were written to assess the underlying constructs of personal meaning, emotional attachment, sense of belonging, enjoyment of engaging in discussion about the centre with other people, and attachment to own centre over others.

Commitment to the team of volunteers was defined as a feeling of belonging to, enjoyment of working with, emotional attachment to, attachment to own team over other teams, and respect for the team. This conceptualisation is consistent with work team commitment conceptualisations in a paid worker context (e.g. Stinglhamber, Bentein & Vandenberghe 2002). Commitment to the volunteer role was defined as being proud of being in that role, emotional attachment to the role, identification with the role, and a feeling that the role had personal meaning to the volunteer. As there are no scales of commitment to the volunteer team or commitment to the volunteer role, we created new items relevant to each target: 5 items assessing commitment to the team, and 4 items assessing commitment to their role. These new measures were tested for clarity and relevance with 21 volunteers from a Little Athletics centre. Redundant or unclear items were deleted. Responses to all items were measured with a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Some items were negatively worded and alternated with positive items to avoid response bias.

The final questionnaire consisted of 21 questions: 7 demographic questions, 5 organisational commitment questions, 5 commitment to the team questions and 4 commitment to the role questions. This instrument can be obtained from the first author upon request.

The data were checked for errors and omissions and entered into SPSS Version 12 for Windows. Questions that had been reversed were recoded so that a higher score denoted higher commitment level.

RESULTS

COMMITMENT TARGETS

Means, standard deviations, measures of internal consistency (alphas) were computed for organisational commitment (commitment to the centre), commitment to the team, and commitment to the role. Intercorrelations amongst commitment targets were also computed. These appear in Table 1.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, scale reliabilities and inter-correlations among all commitment targets

				Inter-correlations	
Variable	Mean	SD	α (no. of items	1	2
1. Organisational commitment (centre)	3.37	.53	.78 (4)		
2. Team commitment	3.69	.46	.70 (4)	.55**	
3. Role commitment	3.36	.58	.85 (4)	.59**	.57**

^{**} Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Commitment values range from 1 to 5, lower values denote lower commitment.

Table 1 indicates that respondents showed a higher level of commitment to the team, followed by commitment to the centre, and commitment to the role.

Scale reliabilities (alphas) were generally found to be good (.74 for commitment to the centre .85 for commitment to the role and .67 for commitment to the team). For the commitment to the centre scale, deletion of item 'I think I could easily become as attached to another centre as I am to this one' resulted in an increase in alpha to .78. For the commitment to the team scale deletion of item 'I think I could easily become attached to another team of volunteers as I am to this one' resulted in an increase in alpha to .7.

DISTINCTIVENESS OF CONSTRUCTS

Factor analytical techniques are normally used to assess the distinctiveness of the commitment dimensions and targets (Cohen 2003; Meyer & Allen 1997). A number of assumptions are assumed before conducting such techniques. Of these, a minimum number of subjects per variable is required, as a rule of thumb, 5 subjects are required per variable (Coakes 2005). Other authors apply more stringent criteria: for example, Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) suggest a minimum of 200 subjects for a 'fair' analysis. Considering the small sample size (n=109) we decided not to use factor analytical methods. Instead, we examined the intercorrelations of the commitment forms to assess concept overlap (Cohen, 2003).

Table 1 shows the intercorrelations amongst targets of commitment. It shows that although these correlations are significant, they fall under .6. Cohen (2003) had suggested that correlations in the range of .6 and .8 might be indicative of concept redundancy. Thus, there is some evidence to support the notion of multiple, distinctive commitments in this setting.

RELATIONS WITH OTHER VARIABLES

The following analyses provide further information on individual differences in the commitment of Little Athletics volunteers. We conducted a series of t-tests and one one-way

⁵⁻point Likert scales used for all measures.

ANOVA (for 'age') to assess individual differences in commitment scores. Commitment mean scores by variable of interest appear in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean commitment scores by demographic and other variables

Variable	N	Centre	Team	Role
Age				
< 34	11	3.7	3.8***	3.7
35–44	62	3.3	3.6 ***	3.2
45–54	28	3.4	3.8 ***	3.4
55 >	8	3.9	4.3 ***	4.0
No. of children				
None/none registered	19	3.3	3.9*	3.4
One or more registered	90	3.4	3.6*	3.3
Volunteer role				
Committee member	54	3.4	3.8	3.5**
Other	55	3.3	3.6	3.2**

^{***} p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05 (2-tailed)

Age. Age appears to have an effect on team commitment. Older volunteers (aged 55 and over) showed the highest commitment to their team (t = 2.75, p < .001, 2-tailed).

Number of children enrolled. The table shows a significant difference by 'having children currently enrolled in the centre' and team commitment. Those with no children currently enrolled are more committed to their team of volunteers than those with children currently involved (t = 2.91, p < .05, 2-tailed).

Main volunteer role. The table shows that there were significant effects by volunteer role undertaken and commitment to the role. Committee members were more committed to their role than other volunteers (t = 2.62, p < .01, 2-tailed).

Other variables. No significant effects were found for volunteering for another sporting organisation, number of seasons as centre volunteer, or number of seasons child had been enrolled in the centre. Similarly, no significant findings were recorded by sex. The latter finding is consistent with findings in paid employee settings (Meyer & Allen 1997).

Taken together, these results suggest that some volunteer characteristics (e.g. age, having children currently active within the centre, role undertaken) have an effect on various commitment targets. Together with the examination of correlations amongst various commitments, these findings provide an indication that there may be multiple commitments in this volunteer context.

DISCUSSION

The present study set out to explore: a) the distinctiveness of three organisational targets of commitment of volunteers in little athletics centres (specifically, the centre, the team of volunteers, and the volunteer role undertaken in the centre) and b) which volunteer

characteristics have an impact on these commitments. In doing so, this study has also taken initial steps in the construction of commitment scales that can be used to assess multiple commitments in a volunteer context, thus extending the applicability of commitment research and theory from paid to volunteer settings.

The findings suggest that volunteers hold commitments to targets other than the main organisation they serve (the organisation, in this case, is the individual's Little Athletics centre). Although some correlations amongst commitment targets were significant, all fell below the recommended coefficient of .6 (Cohen 2003). Further, and as suggested by Cohen, relations with other variables also indicate that the constructs were distinct: older volunteers and those with no children currently enrolled were significantly more committed to their team. Committee members were significantly more committed to their role.

Team commitment emerges as an interesting construct. It was higher than organisational commitment and was affected by antecedents that did not impact on organisational commitment. This result is consistent with previous research that has shown the suitability of team commitment as a focus of study (e.g. Stinglhamber et al. 2002). This finding also seems to indicate that, consistent with Pearce's (1993) suggestion, the commitment to other individuals (the social aspect) is central to the volunteer experience.

It is not clear from this study why older volunteers are more committed to their teams than their younger counterparts. It is reasonable to speculate that older volunteers, particularly above the age of 55, do not have young children currently enrolled in the centre, which allows these volunteers to spend more time and develop relationships with other volunteers. It is also possible that age and experience as a volunteer interact to strengthen commitment to the team (no main effect was found for experience, in this case, number of seasons as volunteer).

The finding that those without children are more committed to their team was unexpected, but may relate to the age-related finding described above. Volunteers with no children currently enrolled may have had children enrolled in the past, and their continuing work as centre volunteers may be a function of their prior attachments. Furthermore, these volunteers may share with other team members a commitment to the sport itself, and may have been involved, or currently are, involved in the centre at senior level as well. Conversely, those volunteers with children currently enrolled may only volunteer because their children are involved in the centre at the present moment, and may willingly move to another centre if their child develops new preferences. Their volunteering with a particular group of people or with a particular centre would be largely situational and unrelated to any feelings of attachment. Further research would need to investigate and substantiate these assumptions.

Role undertaken also shows promise as a commitment target of relevance to volunteer populations. The role undertaken may have implications for the feeling of 'being wanted and needed' and the perception that their own contributions are important (Pearce 1993). In this study committee members showed a higher commitment to the role than other volunteers. In Little Athletics centres, committee members make decisions regarding the running of various aspects of the centre. Committee (office bearer) duties are broader in scope (they entail more responsibility, more decision-making latitude) whilst other volunteer roles, even if clearly defined, are often fulfilled on an 'as-needed' basis. As past research has not focussed on commitment differences between volunteers in decision-making roles and volunteers in other roles, this is potentially a fruitful area for future research.

With regards to scale construction, this study contributes to the development of suitable scales for assessing targets of relevance to volunteers, but further work is needed. In particular, do these scales show adequate internal consistency when used with other volunteer populations? Temporal stability will also need to be established. Finally, future research with larger samples would allow the analyses of the factor structure of the commitment measures to determine the distinctiveness of the various targets of commitment.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS FOR VOLUNTEER-RUN SPORTING AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS

The community-based sporting sector is facing not only a decline in volunteer human resources but also increasing pressures to perform to more stringent standards due to internal and external demands. These changes are altering the relationship between volunteers and their organisations. Given this, it is important to note that commitment can fluctuate according to evaluation of the volunteer experience (Cuskelly, Harrington & Stebbins 2003, p. 193); for this reason, active management of the volunteer experience by volunteer coordinators is needed. Pearce's (1993) assertion that service-related motives and goal-oriented motives may lose their appeal with the passing of time may signal a shift toward an attachment to the people in the organisation. Perception of task importance may also be important to volunteers: if these are not given tasks or roles that are meaningful and which make them feel their contributions matter, they may cease to contribute their work to their respective organisations even in the presence of a commitment to the organisation itself and its ideals.

This study has shown that the investigation of targets of volunteer commitment other than to the organisation as a whole is warranted. We argued earlier that, following Meyer and Herscovitch's (2001) general commitment model, commitment to specific targets (such as a volunteer role) will aid the prediction of outcomes that are of relevance to that target (e.g. remaining in that role or taking skills courses relating to that role). Volunteer organisations will have different aims and objectives to achieve. Undoubtedly, retention and performance will remain at the top of the agenda, but a careful consideration of key organisational aims as precisely as possible (e.g. retention in a particular role, team performance) will assist in selecting the actions required to achieve them. It may be necessary, depending on the case, for volunteer coordinators to focus their management efforts on increasing (or decreasing) commitment to the organisation as a whole or to specific targets (such as the work team or the volunteer role).

These are some of the potential conceptual and practical questions and concerns that can be addressed. It can no longer be assumed that volunteers are committed by virtue of just being volunteers. There is a pressing need for managers in community-based sport to understand that the nature of the psychological relationship between volunteers and their organisations is quite complex and that this relationship has implications for organisational outcomes.

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