How do sport clubs recruit volunteers? Analyzing and developing a typology of decision-making processes on recruiting volunteers in sport clubs

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A B S T R A C T

Effective strategies for recruiting volunteers who are prepared to make a long-term commitment to formal positions are essential for the survival of voluntary sport clubs. This article examines the decision-making processes in relation to these efforts. Under the assumption of bounded rationality, the garbage can model is used to grasp these decision-making processes theoretically and access them empirically. Based on case study framework an in-depth analysis of recruitment practices was conducted in nine selected sport clubs. Results showed that the decision-making processes are generally characterized by a reactive approach in which dominant actors try to handle personnel problems of recruitment in the administration and sport domains through routine formal committee work and informal networks. In addition, it proved possible to develop a typology that delivers an overview of different decision-making practices in terms of the specific interplay of the relevant components of process control (top-down vs. bottom-up) and problem processing (situational vs. systematic).

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1. Introduction

Because voluntary sport clubs are noncommercial and because producing and delivering affordable sport services require large numbers of committed individuals, volunteers continue to be their most important resource (e.g., Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Indeed, without the support of volunteers, most sport clubs would no longer survive. However, there are continuous complaints about increasing difficulties in getting members to volunteer. Current sport club reports express concern about the recruitment of volunteers, especially for more demanding tasks in both the sport and administrative domains (e.g., as coach or board member; see Breuer, 2011; Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Lamprecht, Fischer, & Stamm, 2012). Hence, it is essential for a club to have effective strategies for recruiting sufficient volunteers (in quantitative and qualitative terms) who are prepared to make a long-term commitment to formal positions (e.g., Cuskelly, Taylor, Hoye, & Darcy, 2006).

Recruiting volunteers is a central challenge for sport clubs, and it is important to understand the factors that influence this process. However, this is a complex issue due to differences between (a) types of sport clubs and (b) types of volunteers to be recruited. Although there is a considerable amount of research addressing the recruitment of volunteers in sport

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organizations in general, only few studies have investigated how sport clubs actually handle this problem. Against this background, a first approach to this topic is to develop a typology that will deliver an overview of the crucial pattern of processes involved in how sport clubs deal with this issue. This makes it necessary to find some appropriate dimensions along which clubs, as organizations, do this work, and to indicate which positions various clubs take along these dimensions. Therefore, we shall take a closer look at what can be called the conditions of reproduction in organizations that are related to decision-making.

According to Luhmann's organizational sociological considerations (2000), organizations (in this case, sport clubs) have to be viewed as social systems consisting of (communicated) decisions. This means that organizations are continually reproduced by decision-making processes. All other (observable) factors such as an organization's goals, hierarchy, recruiting strategies, support schemes for volunteers, and so forth have to be seen as an outcome of the operation of prior organizational decisions (Luhmann, 2000; see Thiel & Mayer, 2009, for sport clubs). Recruitment practices within sport clubs are also associated with decision-making processes (e.g., Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1995; Nagel, 2006), and they have to lead to appropriate decisions if processes for recruiting volunteers are to be effective. Managing the difficulties and problems with recruitment requires a clear understanding of these (complex) decision-making processes. Hence, the following study asks: *How do the decision-making processes involved in recruiting volunteers in sport clubs actually work, and which typical characteristics can be identified? Can a typology of recruitment practices in sport clubs be developed that reflects the crucial decision-making patterns in different clubs?*

Based on explorative case studies, this research focuses on examining the decision-making processes and then using the findings of these processes to develop a typology of how sport clubs handle the challenges involved in recruiting volunteers. Developing a clear understanding of these club-specific decision-making processes and identifying divergences as well as common ground in how clubs approach them is crucial for developing sustainable advisory concepts or management tools—particularly ones that can be applied by sport policymakers and sport associations (e.g., Koski, 2012; Skille, 2008). Building on existing research, the present study examines the processes, mechanisms, and factors underlying these decisions in more detail.

1.1. State of research

The sport management literature reveals a series of studies and publications addressing the management of volunteers in sport organizations (e.g., Chelladurai, 2006; Cuskelly, Hoye, et al., 2006; Cuskelly, Taylor, et al., 2006; Kim, Chelladurai, & Trail, 2007; Schulz, Nichols, & Auld, 2011) and the specific characteristics of volunteer recruiting in sport clubs (e.g., Horch, 2009; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2010). There are also several studies analyzing the personnel problems in sport clubs on a structural level (e.g., Breuer, 2011; Lamprecht et al., 2012; Scheerder & Vos, 2009). Such analyses are based predominantly on aggregated data from comparative structural analyses in sport clubs. Their results reveal major differences in the recruitment of volunteers. Whereas some clubs have great difficulties in recruitment (e.g., many vacant positions in the club, low voluntary engagement rate), others continue to have hardly any problems at all (e.g., high voluntary engagement rate, no vacant positions). Furthermore, results of sport club reports show that the larger the membership of a club, the lower the willingness to volunteer and, hence, the higher the recruitment problems (Breuer & Wicker, 2010; Scheerder & Vos, 2009). Employing paid staff also impacts negatively on volunteer recruitment (e.g., Breuer & Wicker, 2010). Sport clubs that can be characterized more as solidarity-oriented communities with homogeneous interests reveal fewer problems (Lamprecht et al., 2012). In contrast, more service-oriented clubs providing a wide range of courses (also for nonmembers) have greater difficulties in recruiting volunteers (Breuer & Wicker, 2010). However, the problems in recruiting volunteers cannot be attributed solely to situational or structural conditions such as a club's size, number of members, or specific club goals. It is also important to consider the underlying decision-making processes within a club (Child, 1972).

Various studies have explored such decision-making processes within the context of organizational changes in national and local sport organizations (e.g., Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004; Fahrner, 2009; Kikulis, 2000; Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992; O'Brien & Slack, 2003; Steen-Johnson & Hanstad, 2008; Stevens & Slack, 1998; Thibault & Babiak, 2005). However, they examined changes in the personnel domain only peripherally, and discussed them mostly in the context of increasing the efficiency and professionalization of various personnel fields (e.g., Horch & Schütte, 2009; Seippel, 2004). Studies explicitly analyzing personnel-related decisions in sport clubs have investigated the conditions under which paid staff and volunteers are recruited (e.g., Nagel, 2006; Seippel, 2002, 2004; Thibault, Slack, & Hinings, 1991; Thiel, Meier, & Cachay, 2006).[1] Although these approaches deliver first insights into the specific conditions involved in recruiting personnel, they reveal large differences between various types of voluntary sport organizations (e.g., Seippel, 2002). The available findings on these decisions indicate that it is frequently only individual dominant key actors or small groups of members who determine club policy and make personnel decisions (e.g., Amis et al., 2004; Nagel, 2006; O'Brien & Slack, 2003). In addition, many sport clubs do not engage in any systematic and widespread recruitment procedures to fill their vacancies, and personnel recruitment is shaped to a high degree by informal rules. The dominant approach is to ask individuals directly or to disseminate information over informal communication channels (Fahrner, 2009; Thiel et al., 2006). Moreover, studies have

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[1] Frequently, personnel decisions in sport organizations are analyzed against the background of the gender problem (underrepresentation of women in leadership positions). These studies examine either: (a) the recruitment of women for voluntary management positions (e.g., Hovden, 2000; Pfister & Radtke, 2009; Schulz & Auld, 2006) or (b) the recruitment of female trainers (e.g., Greenhill, Auld, Cuskelly, & Hooper, 2009; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007).