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Plotting the motivation of student volunteers in sports-based outreach work in the North East of England

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of student volunteers' motivation during their participation in a sports-based outreach project and how their experiences during the programme serve to influence their commitment and retention to it. The Sport Universities North East England (SUNEE) project is a university-led community outreach initiative that provides the region's student volunteers with vast opportunities to gain both experience and qualifications as sports coaches, mentors and leaders by working with a range of hard-to-reach groups. This work draws on qualitative data generated from semi-structured interviews ($n = 40$) and describes a sequence of motivational transitions undergone by student volunteers over the course of their involvement in the project. In order to illustrate this, the paper applies the socio-psychological framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to not only index the type of motivations that compel students to volunteer on the SUNEE project, but to also track motivational adaptation and reveal the features occurring within the project, which serve to either facilitate volunteer motivation or retention (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). By using the example of the SUNEE project, this research demonstrates how students' motivation to volunteer changes from the extrinsic (i.e., instrumental reasons such as enhancing one's employability profile) to the intrinsic (i.e., enjoying the experience) motivations the longer the person has taken part in the project. The findings demonstrate the utility of the SDT as a framework with which to understand student motivation to volunteer within a university-led sports-based community outreach setting. The theoretical contributions of the study to the literature on student volunteering are outlined, and implications are drawn for practice and future research.

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1. Introduction

Volunteers in sport and recreation represent the largest contribution to volunteerism in the UK (Sport & Recreation Alliance, 2016; Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2016). In England, for example, 12.7% (5,600,600) of adults over the age of 16 years volunteered in sport between October 2014 and September 2015 (Sport England, 2016). Nichols, Taylor, Barrett, and Jeanes (2014) state that these volunteers help to sustain approximately 85,000 national governing body affiliated voluntary

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sports clubs (VSCs). Despite what has proved to be a relatively stable sport volunteer rate in England since 2010 (Sport England, 2016), 70% of VSCs stress that they desperately need new volunteers (Join In, 2016).

Although general levels of formal monthly volunteering in 2014–2015 were the same as those recorded in 2001 (27%) (Cabinet Office, 2015), the number of students volunteering in the UK in this period has risen. In 2013, over 725,000 students were reported to be participating in a range of voluntary initiatives organised through their higher education institution (Ellison & Kerr, 2014), compared with the 42,000 recorded by Student Volunteering England in 2004. Those 725,000 students accounted for 31% of all students in higher education in 2013, with their voluntary contributions averaging 44 h across the 32-week school term (Ellison & Kerr, 2014). Ellison and Kerr (2014) also reported that 51% of all student volunteers were involved with organising or helping to run an activity or event, and 18% were specifically involved in coaching or refereeing sports.

This trend coincides with an increase in university-organised and university-led volunteer programmes and placements in recent years, particularly in Western countries (Smith et al., 2010). Many such opportunities are offered as part of integrated community service or service learning type activities, with more and more universities embedding mandatory service learning into higher education programmes (Dean, 2014; Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014; Smith et al., 2010). Research demonstrates that a major driver of student volunteering is to gain work-related experience in order to facilitate access to work and careers post-university (Handy et al., 2010; Hustinx et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2010). A concern held by Dean (2014) and Holdsworth and Brewis (2014) is that if students feel coerced or obliged to volunteer due to a perceived instrumental necessity or external inducement, rather than for intrinsic purposes, then their commitment to the cause may become weakened, or, feelings of resentment towards the activity may be fomented, potentially resulting in their disengagement. As it is, research has indicated that volunteering habits amongst young adults are altering, switching from regular and long-term to more episodic and short-term, in order to fulfil more instrumental needs (Handy, Brodeur, & Cnaan, 2006).

With this in mind, there is an extant body of literature that explores continuation in volunteering across a range of contexts, and Cuskelly, Harrington, and Stebbins (2002) demonstrate that volunteers may re-evaluate their reasons for volunteering from time to time, and as a consequence, reasons for volunteering can and do change. For example, research into regular volunteering in grassroots sports clubs has found that although some participants begin to volunteer for utilitarian purposes, such as to expand their social networks or to create opportunities for their children to play sport, many then continue because they develop affective feelings of attachment or obligation to the organisation and its members (Cuskelly & O'Brien, 2013). Elsewhere, Schlesinger, Egli, and Nagel (2013) found that a sense of collective solidarity amongst sports club volunteers is a powerful determinant of their continuation. Similarly, in one of a limited number of pieces of research into student volunteering on a sport-based service learning programme in the U.S., Bruening et al. (2015) report that the social connectedness that developed between students and community members can promote future intentions to volunteer.

There is, however, a paucity of research examining the motivational evolution of student volunteers involved in sport-related programmes, and therefore a lack of understanding of the social-psychological factors and processes that might influence their retention to such activities. The current research focuses on student volunteering in the Sport Universities North East England (SUNEE) project – a sports-based community outreach project largely run and sustained by the contributions of the region's universities' students. To understand the changing motivation of students whilst volunteering on the SUNEE project, Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory (SDT) – a social-psychological framework for discerning and facilitating motivational development – is applied within this research to explore the psycho-social contexts and processes contributing to adaptations in motivation.

To this end, the purpose of the current study is twofold: First, to demonstrate the utility of SDT for plotting and interpreting the evolution of students' motives to volunteer on a university-led sports-based community outreach project. Second, to provide an understanding of the conditions and contexts elicited on the project that bring about adaptations in their motivation statuses. From this, recommendations are gleaned to support the management of student volunteers on projects akin to that of SUNEE. The aims and contribution of this research are to illustrate the evolving nature of student motivation to volunteer and the factors that elicit such adaptations in order to inform and facilitate the design and management of current or future student volunteer programmes that employ the medium of sport. This paper therefore applies SDT to address the following research questions:

1. What are students' initial motives to volunteer on sports-based community programmes?
2. What are the differences between students' original motives to volunteer and those driving their subsequent stages of retention?
3. What are the conditions and features owing to students' continued volunteering in sports-based community programmes?

2. The SUNEE project

The Sport Universities North East England (SUNEE) federation represents a sport-centred inter-university collaboration in the UK between Durham, Northumbria, Newcastle, Sunderland and Teesside universities. The rationale for the project was

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