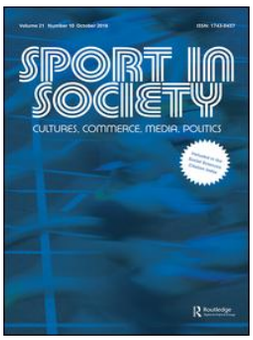

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From the boardroom to tee: understanding golf club volunteers during an era of change

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines volunteers in English golf clubs and considers how they interpret their roles. Hitherto, typologies of sports club volunteering have coalesced around organisational context or the time commitment of volunteers. However, these typologies are limited in capturing intra-organisational complexity, recognising the diverse activities that volunteers perform and reflecting changes in the operating and public policy environments. A grounded theory study was therefore undertaken to explore how sports club volunteers interpret their roles. Golf club volunteering was chosen as the substantive case since golf is a globally significant sport that is facing participation and sustainability challenges. Data was collected and analysed from documents and twenty-one semi-structured interviews. The study found that golf club volunteers tend to interpret their roles in two main ways: with a business management approach that is orientated towards business-like management, customer satisfaction and competing in the contemporary marketplace; and, with a sporting perspective that is orientated towards organising play. Some volunteers combined both aspects, although such hybridity presented significant challenges. The study concludes with a discussion of how the influence of sport policy may be limited by volunteers' subjective interpretations of their role and club context.

KEYWORDS

Golf; volunteer; sport development; sports clubs

Introduction

Sport and recreation represent a significant strand of volunteering in the western world (Smith et al. 2017). Volunteering has therefore become an important and popular theme in sport management research, and there is now a large body of evidence to show that volunteers play a vital role in the operation of sports clubs (Cuskelly, Hoye, and Auld 2006; Lockstone-Binney et al. 2010; Nichols 2017; Wicker 2017). The role that volunteers play is subject to change though as the operating environment changes. Research must keep up with these changes and ensure theories remain adequate for the everyday reality of volunteers.

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In the United Kingdom (UK), sports clubs are subject to a range of external pressures. Over a period of 30 years, the voluntary sector has moved towards the centre of UK political debates and become a recognised tool within the delivery of social policy (Milbourne 2013). Allied to this, there has been a drive towards modernisation that has promoted the structured development of sports clubs (Robinson 2010). As other authors have highlighted, this has had a considerable impact on the sport development sector, including the expectations placed on volunteers, the management and development of volunteers, and the role volunteers now play in national sport policy (Harris, Mori, and Collins 2009; Houlihan and Green 2009). There has been an increased emphasis on quality standards and the professionalisation of coaching (Taylor and Garratt 2010; Seippel 2019). Sports clubs have also been coping with the implications of financial austerity. The state of UK public sector finances has seen a 26% reduction in public expenditure in recreation and sporting activities in the 5 years to 2018/19 (HM Treasury 2019). This reality is acknowledged by public policy which aims to help sports organisations become more sustainable and self-sufficient, so that they can survive with less public funding (HM Government 2015; Sport England 2016b). As the income for national governing bodies ('NGB's) becomes more tightly controlled (Houlihan and Green 2009; Thompson, Bloyce, and Mackintosh 2020) so arguably sports clubs receive less direct NGB funding. Sports clubs are now under direct pressure to become more efficient and diversify income from government arms-length agencies in England (Sport England 2016b). In a competitive leisure market, the drive towards sustainability may be desirable, but not easily achieved. Ownership of assets has been identified as one potential means for sports clubs to build sustainability, with Sport England introducing a new community asset fund to help local groups take ownership of assets from local authorities and elsewhere (Sport England 2016b). However, whilst asset ownership has the potential to empower and strengthen local sports provision, there remain substantial management challenges that are not easily overcome by volunteers (Nichols et al. 2015; Findlay-King et al. 2018). It is possible that the focus of volunteers move away from simple sporting considerations towards business management activities. Volunteers may find themselves making significant decisions around organisational restructuring, managerial efficiencies, asset utilisation, customer satisfaction and income generation.

Modernisation, professionalisation, public sector funding cuts, commercialisation and the ownership of assets are significant trends affecting sports clubs. These trends affect what sports club volunteers do and present fundamental questions over how sports club volunteers experience their roles and volunteering in general. Existing typologies of sports club volunteers classify volunteers by organisational structure (Taylor et al. 2003) or by time, input and involvement (Nichols 2005; Cuskelly, Hoye, and Auld 2006; Ringuet-Riot et al. 2014). These are useful, but limited in how they reflect the changing nature of volunteer activity. It shall be argued in this paper that our understanding of sports club volunteering may be enhanced by attending to volunteers' subjective interpretation of their roles.

This paper addresses sports club volunteering in a changing environment through a study of golf club volunteers in England. Although there are over 33,000 golf club facilities worldwide (R&A 2017), academic research on volunteers in golf has been scant. The only research conducted has been into episodic volunteers at professional golf tournaments (Coyne and Coyne 2001; MacLean and Hamm 2007; Pauline 2011; Love et al. 2018). Golf tournament volunteering is, however, a different phenomenon to golf club volunteering. As Cuskelly, Hoye, and Auld (2006) have argued, volunteers in sports clubs make long-term

sustained contributions. The global absence of any research looking at volunteers within golf clubs is therefore surprising. This is the first study to explore golf club volunteering within the academic literature.

Golf is England's fifth largest participation sport (Sport England 2016a) and it is estimated that there are over 40,000 volunteers playing an important role in running golf clubs (England Golf 2017). However, declining participation in golf over the past decade in England, and more widely in Europe (KPMG 2019), is presenting golf clubs with significant sustainability issues. Since golf clubs usually own their course and clubhouse assets, the associated management and financial responsibilities are considerable. As such, golf clubs provide an interesting case study through which to assess the roles, activities and perspectives of volunteers. The case study may also provide a powerful lens for considering volunteering in other sports club contexts. The systems of governance and the roles played by volunteers in golf clubs are not dissimilar to the other 151,000 sports clubs in the UK (Sport and Recreation Alliance 2013). This is not to assume ideas can be transferred from golf clubs to other sports clubs. Each sport has its own subtle cultural organisational contexts. The provision of ample contextual information throughout the paper should, nevertheless, allow readers to assess transferability of findings to other sporting contexts.

Drawing on the empirical study of golf club volunteers, the purpose of this paper is to explore sports club volunteering that reflects the contemporary operating environment. It does this by posing the following research objectives:

- To understand who volunteers in golf clubs, the organisational context in which they operate and the activities they undertake.
- To explore how golf club volunteers interpret their roles and what implications this has for categorising sports club volunteers.

This paper has three key themes. Firstly, it highlights the important roles played by volunteers within golf club management and counters previous literature that largely ignores their contribution (Breitbarth, Kaiser-Jovy, and Dickson 2018). Secondly, this paper highlights how golf club volunteers understand and interpret the purpose of their roles in either business management or sporting terms. Finally, the paper goes on to consider the implications of the findings for the NGB England Golf, as well as other sports clubs and their volunteer workforce.

Categorising volunteers in sport

This section reviews the literature on typologies of sports club volunteers. These typologies include formal/informal, core/peripheral and regular/episodic. It considers the development of each typology and then assesses their utility.

In Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth (1996) widely used definition of volunteering, a key component is the context in which the volunteering takes place. The model distinguishes between: formal volunteering within an organisation; and, informal volunteering as help given to friends, neighbours and others outside of an organisational context. In the organisational context of sports clubs, the formal/informal typology tends to locate volunteering within the category of 'formal' volunteering (Taylor et al. 2003). This simple distinction is not, however, without problems. The difference between what is formal and informal may

not be clear (Nichols 2017). When an individual without an official role helps out within a sports club, it could be construed as informal volunteering. There are also challenges in determining exactly when a group of individuals acting together becomes a formal organisation. With the newfound ability to convene via social media and the growth of more individualistic sports (Gilchrist and Wheaton 2016), informal volunteering in sport seems likely to increase over the coming years.

The 'formal' categorisation of sports club volunteering also implies homogeneity among volunteers within that category, which does not necessarily reflect the complexity inherent in organisational contexts (Adams and Deane 2009). Within the same organisation, considerable diversity may exist in organisational features and volunteers' experience. The concept of formal volunteering, therefore, provides us with a useful starting point in categorising sports club volunteers, but further sub-categories would be helpful to position volunteering within organisational contexts and provide a better basis for supporting volunteers. Whilst Adams and Deane (2009) attempted this by modifying the formal/informal typology to incorporate volunteers' subjective interpretations of agency and structure, it is doubtful whether this approach creates a concept that is useful. Practitioners are unlikely to spend time pondering the subjective agency of others.

The core/peripheral typology was first developed by Pearce (1993) to distinguish volunteers that were highly involved within voluntary organisations. It was subsequently applied to the study of sports club volunteers (Cuskelly, Hoye, and Auld 2006; Ringuet-Riot et al. 2014). Core volunteers were conceptualised as being more likely to perform a governance or high-level management role, contribute more time, have high levels of commitment and fill more than one role. In contrast, peripheral volunteers were more likely to perform operational level roles and contribute less of their time. Similarly, Nichols (2005) sought to distinguish between sports club volunteers based on the amount of time they contributed to volunteering, with 'stalwarts' being defined as those contributing more than 300 hours each year.

Another typology based on volunteers' inputs is the distinction between episodic and long-term continuous volunteers. The typology, first specified by Macduff (2005), was established in response to the growing trend towards volunteers providing short-term and occasional service. This contrasted with the more traditional type of long-term continuous volunteering. Whilst the growing incidence of episodic volunteering has been discussed in the context of sports clubs (Nichols 2017), research and discussion on episodic volunteering has tended to be remain associated with event volunteering (Cuskelly, Hoye, and Auld 2006; Pauline and Pauline 2009; Neufeind, Güntert, and Wehner 2013). The lack of empirical consideration of episodic volunteers within sports clubs may be due to the similarity of the typology with that of the core/peripheral classification, with the dimension of time input being central to both.

The core/peripheral and regular/episodic typologies are useful in providing a means to analyse volunteers by their inputs. However, the input of time is a continuous variable and hardly a good basis for a dichotomous typology. Classification by time input also pays little heed to how innovation and technology may change volunteer activity and productivity. Greater engagement with the external environment has the potential to increase innovative practices within sports clubs (Wemmer and Koenigstorfer 2016), change the tasks done by volunteers and the way they do them. Thus, by emphasising time inputs, the core/peripheral and regular/episodic classifications are limited in categorising volunteering. Other

categorisations, which reflect what volunteers actually do and how they interpret their roles, may offer other useful insights into sports club volunteering.

Methodology

Grounded theory approach

This study aims to explore for the first time the volunteers in English golf clubs. It seeks to establish who volunteers within golf clubs, where they volunteer and what they do, and to explore how volunteers interpret their roles within a contemporary context. Since this study sought to explore a substantive case not previously considered by literature, grounded theory was chosen as the research method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Furthermore, since the study sought to understand volunteers' interpretations of their roles, the study utilised the constructivist strand of grounded theory (Charmaz 2014).

Data collection

Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that grounded theorists should draw on a range of materials with a potential bearing on the study. This study, therefore, gathered data from a wide variety of documents and twenty-one semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, a phased approach was taken to data collection to allow for ongoing data analysis, theoretical sampling of golf clubs and the development of theoretical categories.

The first phase involved collecting and analysing documents, most of which came from England Golf. Some of the documents were publicly available, such as a published report on a survey of golf clubs (England Golf 2018) and guidance for golf clubs on good governance (England Golf 2016, 2019). Most documents were not publicly available though, including: internal database reports analysing types of golf clubs; an internal report presenting data from a 2017 survey of golf club volunteers; guidance for golf clubs on managing volunteers; template volunteer role descriptions; and, meeting minutes from a volunteer advisory group.

The initial phase was followed by three phases of semi-structured interviews with golf club volunteers. The interviews were conducted at the golf clubs, usually in a meeting room or a quiet corner of the clubhouse lounge. The researcher used a topic guide to explore golf club volunteers' personal experience, perspectives and meanings in a gently guided conversation. The researcher started interviews by asking volunteers how they became volunteers and what volunteer roles they filled. The interviews went on to consider each individual's experience as a volunteer and addressed how they interpreted their role. Open questions were used throughout the interview to allow participants to raise relevant issues that may not have been considered by the researcher. Interviews typically lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Altogether, the interviews exceeded 17 hours of recorded conversation.

Theoretical sampling was used to recruit golf clubs and volunteers. For each phase, selection criteria were created, which included the desired characteristics of golf clubs and their volunteers. The criteria sought to minimise or maximise the differences between groups or concepts in the data, as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and emphasised by Urquhart (2013). The researchers worked with England Golf to identify appropriate golf

clubs and with the golf clubs to identify appropriate interviewees to meet the desired criteria. The process of theoretical sampling across the phases is shown in Table 1.

Theoretical sampling was also used to select interviewees within each club. Table 1 shows how consideration of group differences and the emergent categories of 'business management' and 'organising play' led to a deeper consideration of volunteer characteristics. Over the course of the study, theoretical sampling decisions took account of various volunteer characteristics, including gender, age, and golfing experience. Each characteristic was targeted with the aim of understanding whether volunteer interpretations of their roles were similar or different across diverse types of volunteer.

Table 2 below provides a brief summary of the golf clubs included in this study. Tables 3–5 summarise the characteristics of volunteers interviewed in this study.

During visits to the golf club, the lead researcher recorded notes on his observations. Documents were also collected from each golf club, including accounts, publicity materials,

Table 1. Application of theoretical sampling in this study.

Phase 1

Document analysis

Collecting and analysing documents from the golf industry, especially within England, to provide an understanding of context.

Phase 2

Club A

- Club A was chosen as it provided an opportunity to establish some basic analytical categories.

Characteristics of the club that made it a good foundational case included:

- A typical members' golf club with a long history and traditional outlook.
- Impressive contribution from volunteers.
- Volunteers were mostly aged over 60 years and retired, and therefore typical of most golf club volunteers.

Phase 3

Club B

Group difference:

- Club B shared Club A's long history and tradition. However, Club B extended group difference because it was struggling and was not located in an affluent area.
- Club B provided opportunities to maximise the difference in volunteer characteristics since there were several prominent and long-standing female volunteers.

Conceptual development:

- The club emphasised competitive golf but lacked good business management. This provided the opportunity to explore other volunteer interpretations of business management.

Club C

Group difference:

- Club C lacked the long histories of Clubs A and B. The club had less entrenched behavioural norms and was comparatively informal.
- The club included volunteers who had first taken up golf as adults, which provided opportunities to maximise difference among volunteers studied.

Conceptual development:

- The club had several volunteers who had taken up golf as adults and placed less emphasis on competitive golf. This provided opportunities to explore perspectives on volunteering among less established golfers and whether this affected attitudes towards organising play.

Phase 4

Club D

Group difference:

- The club had several volunteers who had comparatively short playing and membership histories. Although similar volunteers had been found in Club C, Club D provided the opportunity to further explore their experience inside a relatively traditional golf club.

Conceptual development:

- The club's membership included both 'traditionalist' and 'relaxed' older members. The club was also slowly changing and becoming more professional. This provided an opportunity to explore the extent to which volunteers interpreted their volunteering in business management terms within a changing environment.

Table 2. Summary of golf clubs included in this study.

	Club A	Club B	Club C	Club D
Location	Southern England	Northern England	Midlands	Northern England
History	100+ years	100+ years	Less than 30 years	100+ years
Internal structure	Board Playing sections	Council (large) Sub-committees Playing sections	Board Playing sections	Board Sub-committees Playing sections
Strategic orientation	Aimed to be a top-end club. High quality facilities.	Lacking strategic direction and struggling.	Lower/mid-market position and very accessible. Improving.	Mid-market, providing a quality experience at a reasonable cost.
Full annual members fee (nearest '000)	£1,600	£600	£600	£700

Table 3. Analysis of interviewees by gender.

	Club A	Club B	Club C	Club D	Total	Percent
Male	4	1	5	3	13	62%
Female	2	3	2	1	8	38%
Total	**6**	**4**	**7**	**4**	**21**	**100%**

Table 4. Analysis of interviewees by age.

Age	Club A	Club B	Club C	Club D	Total	Percent
Under 60	1	1	4	–	6	29%
Over 60	5	3	3	4	15	71%
Total	**6**	**4**	**7**	**4**	**21**	**100%**

Table 5. Analysis of interviewees by playing biography.

Playing biography	Club A	Club B	Club C	Club D	Total	Percent
Learnt to play golf as a junior	4	4	2	–	10	48%
Learnt to play as adult	2	–	5	4	11	39%
Total	**6**	**4**	**7**	**4**	**21**	**100%**

website pages, newsletters and notices. These provided additional context to understanding each golf club.

Data analysis

Analysis of the data collected was performed using grounded theory coding techniques (Urquhart 2013). Open coding was used to assign a category of analysis to words in the data that reflected participants' perspectives on their volunteering. Pieces of data were constantly compared with other data assigned to the same code to assess whether it represented the same concept. Selective coding was then used to group open codes into higher-level categories. After the initial document analysis and first phase of interviews, the open codes describing volunteers' interpretations of their roles were clustered into two categories. Subsequent phases of data collection and analysis fleshed out and adjusted categorical properties and assessed whether the categories would stand up in different types of golf clubs. Whilst recognising that the lead researcher played an active role in developing the categories, he sought to ensure that knowledge generated from the study was not distanced from research participants' everyday understandings of their own volunteering and thus the findings remain grounded (Charmaz 2014).

By the end of phase 4, data collection was no longer yielding new analytical insights. The data was simply producing more data for existing codes and no new codes were being created. In grounded theory, this is generally referred to as 'theoretical saturation' and represents an appropriate point to cease data collection (Urquhart 2013; Charmaz 2014)

Golf

To provide context for this study, this section offers a concise review of what is known about the golf industry, golf clubs and golf volunteering in England. It also summarises what is currently known about golf club volunteers from a review of grey literature and other documents obtained as part of this study.

The golf industry and golf clubs

Golf is a sport of global significance and deserves extensive research interest. Principally consumed through participation, purchasing equipment and spectating, its market size has been estimated at $84billion in the United States (Ozawa, Ryan, and Grueber 2018) and €13.5billion in Europe (Sports Marketing Surveys Inc 2013). Within the UK, market size is around £5bn (Sports Marketing Surveys Inc 2013; Sport Industry Research Centre 2016), with England accounting for £3.2billion (Sports Marketing Surveys Inc 2014). Notwithstanding the methodological challenges of arriving at such figures, it is evident that golf represents a major sub-sector of the leisure industry. It is, however, a sector under pressure. Although golf experienced substantial worldwide growth in participation during the 1980s and 1990s (Stoddart 2006), from the mid-2000s the general trend in participation in most western golf markets has been sideways or downwards (KPMG 2019). For example, in England, in the ten years to 2016 estimates of the number of adults playing golf at least once a week fell 18% from 889,100 to 729,300 (Sport England 2016a).

As suppliers of golf courses, golf clubs play a central role in providing opportunities to participate in the sport. It is estimated that there are over 33,000 golf facilities in the world, with just under half in the United States and a quarter in Europe (R&A 2017). In England, the largest European market, it is estimated that 60% of the golf industry's revenues flow into golf clubs (Sports Marketing Surveys Inc 2014). During the 1980s and 1990s, there was strong growth in golf course supply. However, as participation began to fall in the mid-2000s, growth has given way to static or, in some mature and developed markets, declining numbers of golf courses (KPMG 2019). In England, golf club closures are now commonly reported (Bisset 2019).

Globally, research into golf clubs is scarce. Studies have investigated membership development (Ferreira and Gustafson 2006), marketing activities (Shaw and Alderson 1995; Brooksbank, Garland, and Werder 2012) and performance management (Mort and Collins 2001), but not in any great depth. Where research has delved more deeply inside the golf club, it has tended to focus on the role of gender. Various studies have looked at how gender has influenced social identities and culture within the sport (McGinnis, McQuillan, and Chapple 2005, McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan 2008; Reis and Correia 2013; Mitchell, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2016). A further study has highlighted diversity among golf clubs and argued that local socio-cultural geographical aspects are instructive in understanding them (Perkins 2010). Across these studies, it is apparent that there is considerable variety in golf club ownership, management and culture.

In a recent survey of sports clubs in England and Wales, the Sport and Recreational Alliance (2016) found that, compared to others sports clubs, golf clubs typically have: a larger number of members; significantly higher costs of membership; and, larger revenues and expenditure. Golf clubs were also more likely to own their own facilities, which is unsurprising given the extensive land requirements of a golf course. Although the non-probability convenience sampling places limitations on the generalisability of this survey's results, it highlights golf clubs' distinctive features. With significant income and assets, it is tempting to view golf clubs in wholly professional terms (Breitbarth, Kaiser-Jovy, and Dickson 2018). However, as this paper argues, there is a risk of understating the significant contribution made by volunteers to the operation of golf clubs.

English golf clubs and their volunteers

Historical research has shown that volunteering in golf clubs has longstanding roots (Holt 1990; Vamplew 2016). Many private member clubs were founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Such clubs were generally formed by groups of middle-class men coming together to acquire land and build golf clubs (Vamplew 2016) and were founded on the principle of self-governance (Holt 1990). Although the following century saw golf grow through the establishment of different club types, including proprietary and municipal courses, the amateur self-organising ethos has remained a feature of the sport.

In England, a national survey estimated that 148,900 people engage in some form of volunteering in golf each year (Sport England 2015). Since this survey measures all forms of volunteering related to golf, it includes volunteering at professional and amateur golf tournaments. For golf club volunteering, the best estimate comes from England Golf, which recently sought to measure the number of golf club volunteers through their biennial golf club survey (England Golf 2018). This estimated an average of 23 volunteers in each golf club, which implies a national total of around 44,000. Since episodic and less formal volunteers were probably under-reported by golf clubs, this figure may represent an under-estimate.

Demographics of golf club volunteers

Table 6 presents descriptive statistics obtained from an England Golf internal report on its 2017 volunteer survey. The survey was promoted to just under 200,000 subscribers to England Golf newsletters and membership schemes and was completed by 2,016 volunteers. Since the data was collected via a convenience sample, the results are subject to both sample selection and non-response bias. Nevertheless, the report gives a snapshot of golf club volunteers. The statistics indicate that golf club volunteers are predominantly older, retired and male. This is unsurprising given that golf club membership is dominated by older men, with 79% of members being male and 63% aged over 55 (England Golf 2018).

According to the England Golf survey of volunteers, 98% of golf club volunteers are members of their golf club. There is also a strong correlation between regularly playing golf and volunteering in a golf club, with 95% of golf club volunteers playing golf at least once a week. Since 63% of all adult golf club members play once a week or more (England Golf

Table 6. Descriptive statistics from England Golf's 2017 survey of golf club volunteers (n = 2,016).

	Number	%
Gender		
Male	1,401	69%
Female	615	31%
Age		
Under 25	24	1%
25–34 years	11	1%
35–44 years	40	2%
45–54 years	196	10%
55–64 years	687	34%
Over 65	1,058	52%
Employment status		
Retired	1,366	68%
Employed	533	26%
Other	117	6%
Participation in playing golf		
Twice a week or more	1,658	82%
Once a week	255	13%
2–3 times per month	64	3%
Once a month or less	24	1%
Not any more	13	1%
Never played golf	2	0%

2018), it appears that volunteers play more regularly than the average club member. This is consistent with the older and retired profile of volunteers, who have more leisure time to play golf. Interviewees who were retired frequently talked about being able to play more golf post-retirement because they had more leisure time.

The internal organisation of golf clubs

Figure 1 compares the types of golf clubs where individuals volunteer and the ownership profile of all golf clubs registered with England Golf. It shows that there are proportionately more volunteers in private member clubs than there are in proprietary and municipal clubs. Private members clubs are run on an associational basis and therefore rely upon members to govern and oversee the management of the club and all its facilities. The governing body within private members clubs is usually referred to as either a board, council or management committee, and is democratically elected from among the membership. In contrast, proprietary clubs are owned by private shareholders and municipal clubs by local authorities. They do not generally require volunteers to perform governance roles. Proprietary and municipal owners also usually take responsibility for the management of the golf course and clubhouse.

Analysis of interview data collected in this study highlighted that internal organisational structure also influenced volunteer activity. The internal structures of golf clubs are often extensive. In addition to a governing body, most clubs have a series of sections, typically comprising a men's, ladies, seniors and juniors sections. Each section has an organising committee comprising a captain, vice-captain and other committee members. These committees focus on organising and supporting play, including arranging competitions, matches

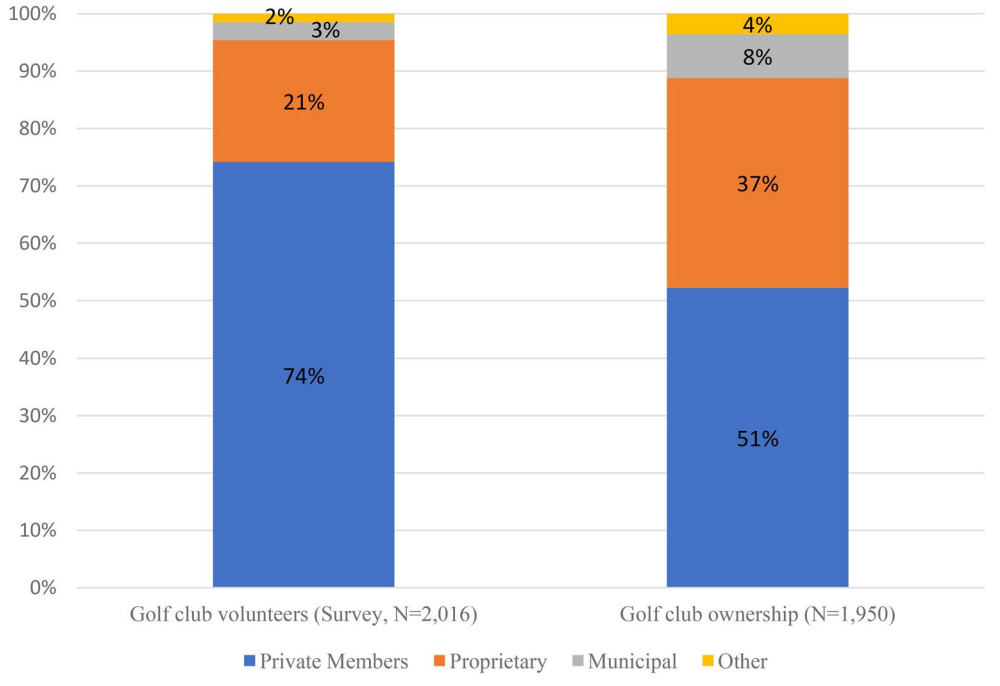

Figure 1. Golf club volunteers and organisational types .
(Sources: England Golf Volunteering Survey 2017 and a report from England Golf's database 2017).

and associated social events. These section committees are often found in proprietary and municipal courses, as well as private members clubs.

It was apparent from the analysis of England Golf documents and interview data that internal structures were being changed within private member clubs. Whilst section committees had traditionally elected representatives on to the main board, some volunteers said this made for large and cumbersome boards that lacked focus. Some volunteers spoke of how their clubs were seeking to improve club governance and were installing smaller governing boards with members elected to oversee specific management functions. This was in accordance with England Golf guidelines on good governance (England Golf 2016, 2019). The rationale was that the governing body could then concentrate on strategic business management matters affecting the club. Thus, some private member clubs were changing intra-organisational structures to more clearly divide responsibility between business management and the organisation of play.

Results

Understanding golf volunteer activities

In the research interviews, volunteers enthusiastically described what they did and what they aimed to achieve. In grouping together open codes from their accounts, our data analysis generated selective codes that categorised volunteers' interpretation of their roles

by: business management; and, organising and supporting the playing of golf. These two categories were adequate for understanding most volunteer's interpretations of their roles. However, the coding also threw up instances of volunteers combining both perspectives, which led to a third hybrid categorisation. All three categories are illustrated below.

Volunteer orientation to business management

Business management activities are distinguished by their focus on business management processes and the efficient and effective management of the golf club's facilities. As noted in Sect. 4.4 above, volunteers are typically engaged in these activities on the boards of private member clubs. Volunteers involved in business management activities play an important role in setting the strategic direction of golf clubs. They are active in creating long-term visions for their clubs and felt a strong sense of stewardship. They were conscious that their decisions would affect the club's long-term future. They were motivated to positively influence the direction of the golf club. They were also interested in how they could run their club better. They recognised the changes in the operating environment that had occurred over recent decades and the challenges the sport of golf was now facing.

Significantly, volunteers often described success in business management terms. They were focussed on growth in membership, visitors, reputation and income. One golf club chairman reflected on the progress his golf club was making:

> The membership is slowly building. The club's getting a better reputation, people that have left are coming back and that sort of thing. That, therefore, makes the club more successful.

Business management volunteers felt a strong responsibility to make their golf club financially sustainable. This meant balancing the books by generating enough membership, visitor green fee, hospitality and other income to cover expenditure. However, they often experienced resistance from other members, particularly where income producing measures conflicted with members' enjoyment of facilities. For example, accepting a booking to hire out hospitality facilities for a wedding may bring in much needed income, but it may also impinge on members' use of the clubhouse. Similarly, making tee times available to paying visitors restricted members' access to the course. This could present business management volunteers with dilemmas. In many cases, they were willing to make difficult decisions to advance the financial position of their club.

The interest in good financial management was especially evident in the capital investment decisions that business management volunteers were required to make. In the management of the golf course and clubhouse there is always a list of desirable improvements and choices had to be made. One board member sums up the challenge:

> We need to work out how the money is going to be spent. You know, so what needs doing on the course, what needs doing in the bar area, what needs doing behind-the-scenes in catering, what needs to be done in the car park, grounds, locker rooms. You can't spend all the money in one area.

Capital expenditure decisions were characterised not just by the utility that members would derive from them but also by the wider customer service and financial returns that they were likely to produce. The condition and playability of the course is usually the highest priority

in the management of a golf club's facilities. Volunteers were aware of how their capital expenditure decisions affected both member and visitor satisfaction, as this board member discusses:

> We've got a number of trees and in autumn the course gets covered with leaves and so there are lots of lost balls and slow play. So we bought an attachment to the tractor, and we've bought a leaf blower. It clears the fairways very quickly and everyone was chuffed to bits with that… We're always looking for quick cheap wins that will make a big difference at a little cost.

The use of language associated with customer service was apparent among business management volunteers. They talked about keeping members happy and making a good impression on visitors. There was a frequently expressed desire to convert visitors into members. To do this, volunteers appreciated the importance of giving golfers a good '*customer experience*', not just on the course but also in the clubhouse. The following quote from a board member with responsibility for club marketing highlights their orientation towards good customer service management:

> I've done a bit of work with a workshop on customer service, on the capturing of new inquiries or phone calls. We had a system here where if it wasn't picked up after one call, it went to someone else and then to someone else and then to someone else. Well, I don't know about you but if you're in the end of the phone and after eight rings I'm gone.

In addition to strategic roles, there was also evidence of a business management orientation among volunteers involved in operational activities. These activities included maintaining and improving facilities, both on the golf course and in the clubhouse. Maintenance roles are rarely found in proprietary clubs since there is an expectation that the profit-making owner should be responsible for this. However, within private member clubs, volunteers were happy to do this sort of work, not just because they benefit from it as members, but because it saves the club money, keeps membership fees down and helps to sustain the club. One course maintenance volunteer described how volunteers' contribution helped to improve visitors' perceptions of the golf course:

> Volunteers painted all the marker posts. It's that one chance to make a first impression. So, it looks better. It's not costing anybody any money, other than a bit of paint and physical commitment.

From an operational perspective, it was also evident that volunteers were involved in customer facing roles. In response to industry initiatives led by the England Golf, volunteers are now supporting new golfers to integrate into golf clubs. Often known as 'buddies', these roles are being created to help attract and retain new members. Volunteers readily talked in business-like terms about the impact they were having on annual membership renewal rates and the beneficial impact on club finances, as illustrated by one board member:

> I got involved in recruitment and retention because I just feel that's been left to its own devices and people join a golf club and nothing happens. You pay your money and then what? My idea was that we would find a way of getting them integrated, contact them, speak to them, work out what level of golf they've played before or if they haven't played before. That was my first input really. Then it's moved on from there to getting people involved into golf initially and setting up lessons and setting up sessions where we can go out and play together… Golf clubs are struggling to keep the memberships up. So, I think recruitment and retention is vital.

Volunteer orientation to organising and supporting the playing of golf

Organising and supporting play activities are distinguished by their focus on the game of golf and the social activities that accompany it. The meanings that volunteers attached to organising golf were distinct from the more neoliberal fiscal focus of business management volunteers where talk was dominated by finance, customer service and retention. Organising golf activities were usually embedded within each of the club's sections and principally focussed on the arrangement of internal competitions for members, competitive matches against other clubs and open competitions. Regular internal competitions are a central feature of most golf clubs and allow golfers to play competitive golf. A handicapping system, whose records are usually maintained by a volunteer handicap secretary, allows golfers of different abilities to compete against each other. One Ladies Captain described the value of volunteers organising and supporting play:

> When you think what you do get involved with, a lot of it is a bit trivial but it all goes to making the ladies section tick and work. And if somebody like a volunteer didn't do it, for instance like sorting out how a certain competition is going to be played or the menus for a function, if volunteers didn't do it then paid staff would have to do it, because these things don't just happen. You can't just have people pitching up and think yeah we'll play for the trophy today, it's a nice day let's do it. Things don't run like that.

The arrangement of matches against other golf clubs involved fixing dates and picking teams. This task is usually assigned to the section captain and vice-captain, who will also perform ceremonial duties on the day such as making a speech. The section committees will also usually take the lead in the organisation of competitions that are open to golfers from other clubs. The level of detail that volunteers go into to arrange these could be considerable, as this seniors' captain explains:

> It's my job to organise all of the Seniors Opens and Invitational events. With the help of the staff in the office, we organise those events. We publish it and encourage people to play. We organise the event, the meal afterwards and all the nearest the pin on the golf course, the longest drive, and then I do the speeches at the end about thanking people for coming and announce the results and make presentations of the prizes, and things like that.

Junior organising and associated child safeguarding functions represent another important volunteer activity within a golf club. Most golf clubs have a junior organiser who is responsible for attracting and developing young golfers. The role is often, but not always, supported by a junior organising committee. A junior organiser described the wide range of tasks involved:

> My role within the club and the juniors is organising matches and making sure they are everywhere that they need to be, setting up matches and that kind of stuff. It's picking teams, organising competitions, processing the competitions. Everything that goes around that really. Scheduling the comps, that sort of stuff.

Volunteers may support junior golfers to develop their technical golf skills, although it is not common for volunteers to take on specific coaching roles. Golf clubs typically have their own professional coaches, usually referred to as the '*club pro*'. Volunteer coaches are generally seen as a potential threat to the income and viability of the club pro. Where volunteer coaches are found, they tend to have low level coaching qualifications and operate under the supervision of the more highly qualified golf professional.

Golf is a convivial sport and social activity often accompanies competitive golf. Volunteers therefore organise social activities and events. High profile club competitions, matches and open tournaments are often followed by a formal dinner. Volunteers are involved in planning these dinners and captains will generally be expected to speak at them. Volunteers are also involved in the organisation of other social events within the clubhouse, such as quiz nights, themed evenings or dances.

Overall, organising and supporting play makes a significant contribution to the enjoyment of golf. Whilst organising and supporting play activities may appear comparatively trivial compared to business management activities, there are more volunteers involved in the former. Volunteers involved in organising play felt that their contributions were fundamental to maintaining the character of golf clubs.

The challenge of hybrid roles that combine orientations towards business management and organising play

In the main, golf club volunteers interpreted their roles in ways that marked them out as being focussed on either business management or the organisation of play. However, there were instances where the volunteer role incorporated both business management and organising play activities. In these instances, the focus and interpretation of their role became blurred. In two of this study's golf clubs, volunteers involved in organising play also held positions on the board. The club's constitution and governance arrangements gave section captains and other section representatives a voting seat on the board. Some of these volunteers reported frustrations with long and unproductive management committee meetings that got diverted into the minutiae of golf club life. In these instances, the board appeared to lack a clear focus on business management issues.

The role of Club Captain often spans both business management and organising play. Although typically only in post for a year, in some private member clubs the Club Captain leads the board during their tenure. This is in addition to other captaincy duties associated with organising and supporting play. This makes for a wide ranging and potentially burdensome role. It also creates issues for club management whereby strategic direction could shift annually with every incoming captain.

Recognising that a sharper focus on effective business management was needed, some golf clubs are finding it pragmatic to clearly separate business management and organising play functions. Interviewees talked about how their clubs were '*modernising*' and adopting new internal structures. Some clubs were undergoing governance reform, typically moving towards boards of directors with 6 to 8 members appointed for 3-year terms. In such clubs, the captaincy roles became almost exclusively focussed on organising play and ceremonial duties. After a reorganisation in one club, a volunteer described how taking captains off the board allowed them to focus on organising play:

> I think it leaves the men's captain and ladies captain free really to concentrate on the running of their section, which as we've said, is mainly about the playing side and not really to worry about the overall club running and finances or anything like that.

Business management and organising play activities are not mutually exclusive. Activities in one domain may affect the other. For example, the organisation of successful club competitions may be good for a club's membership retention and financial performance.

However, the distinction between volunteers principally orientated towards business management and those principally concerned with organising competitive golf for their members has pragmatic utility. As described above, it is a distinction that golf clubs and their volunteers are increasingly making.

Discussion and implications

There were two objectives to this study. The first objective was to understand who volunteers in golf clubs, the organisational context in which they operate and the activities they undertake. The contextual data presented in this study, especially the wider research from the survey of golf club volunteers (England Golf 2017), shows that golf club volunteers are distinguished by their older age profile and their retirement status. This is different to many other sports clubs where volunteers tend to be younger adults in full-time employment (Nichols 2017). This difference to other sports contexts can be explained by the fact that most golf club members are older and retired, and golf club volunteers come from among club members. This is consistent with other research that found sports club membership to be the strongest predictor of sports club volunteering (Hallmann 2015). Regular participation on the golf course and volunteering to organise play is indictive of volunteers systematically pursuing a hobby, which appears consistent with the serious leisure paradigm of volunteering (Stebbins 2004). However, this study found some volunteers increasingly focussed on business management objectives, which may challenge assumptions that golf club volunteers are merely hobbyists. Previous accounts of golf club management (Breitbarth, Kaiser-Jovy, and Dickson 2018) have underplayed the significance of volunteers, privileging instead the role of professional staff. This study has shown that volunteers fulfil substantial business management functions, especially within private member golf clubs.

The second objective of this study was to explore the interpretations that golf club volunteers have about what they do, and what implications this has for categorising sports club volunteers. This research observes that golf clubs and their volunteers are increasingly distinguishing between business management and organising play. There is a reorientation among many golf clubs towards succeeding in a competitive marketplace through good business and financial management. Some volunteers' increasing orientation to business management is helping them manage their clubs more effectively in the face of lower participation and the competitive pressures this creates. In this regard, there are some continuities between this study's findings and the formal/informal typology of sports volunteers (Taylor et al. 2003) in as much as this study concurs that organisational context matters.

This study is sympathetic to Adams and Deane (2009) assertion that considerable complexity lies both across and within organisational contexts, and that these influence the subjective interpretations of volunteers. Classifying golf club volunteers as 'formal' is a useful staring point, but it still leaves us short in understanding the complexities that golf clubs and their volunteers face. The activities and focus of volunteers within organisations can be markedly different. In golf clubs, some volunteers are orientated to the organisation of play and are content in providing golfers with opportunities to play the sport and to socialise. Interpretations of their role may not extend much beyond sporting considerations. However, there are other volunteers with a business management orientation that are focussed on securing the long-term sustainability of their golf clubs in a challenging

operating environment. They are increasingly recognising that a distinct business-like approach, with a focus on effective management and customer satisfaction, is necessary to secure their club's long-term financial sustainability.

The research presented in this paper has the potential to enhance practitioners understanding and management of golf volunteer activities and experience. There are over 33,000 golf facilities worldwide (R&A 2017) and those that involve volunteers will gain for the first time an insight into how volunteers understand and interpret their roles. Many English golf clubs already appreciate that there is a need for more business-like approach and are changing internal organisational structures to create a sharper focus on business management. This is no great revelation. However, it is the conclusion of this paper that more golf clubs would benefit from creating internal organisational structures that help volunteers to focus on either business management or organising play. In private member clubs, this should involve the creation of a board of directors with a long-term strategic approach and a clear focus on managing their golf club in a business-like way. This should help golf clubs make good business decisions that help them to thrive in a competitive leisure economy.

There are significant implications from our study for England Golf, the NGB responsible for the sport in England. It has been shown in this paper that golf is reliant on ageing volunteers and remains dominated by men. This provides a contrast with the call for more diversity in sports participation and volunteering as set out in Sport England's Volunteer Plan for England (Sport England 2017) and wider government policy goals (HM Government 2015; Sport England 2016b). In its support for clubs, the NGB is asked to meet targets and set goals for delivery of volunteer goals at a national level. This study has significant implications for the mechanics of how this may happen, as it involves 44,000 volunteers across almost 2,000 golf clubs. Recruiting volunteers and encouraging them into business leadership style roles is a significant ask and represents a substantially different proposition to volunteering to support play (e.g. junior development; women and girls development). This study shows a willing and motivated volunteer workforce but with different foci to their activities. A single unified driver to motivate is not always apparent.

It seems likely that the implications will also be of interest to other sports clubs as they also react to organisational and NGB pressures to shape volunteer activities, choices and behaviours (Thompson, Bloyce, and Mackintosh 2020). It has already been shown that the implications of NGB policy change on volunteer roles across different sporting sectors are highly contested (Harris, Mori, and Collins 2009). While reliance on volunteers to deliver social policy as well as sport policy goals remains as steadfast as ever, it seems likely that volunteers will continue to interpret their roles in ways particular to their own sport and club context.

Other sports clubs, especially those managing assets and wishing to improve financial sustainability, may benefit from reviewing their volunteer activities. This would be especially relevant to sports clubs taking on the ownership of assets for the first time. Sports clubs may wish to consider whether, in the face of growing competition and operational complexity, they should implement structures that clearly delineate business management and the organisation of play. These are important considerations when developing volunteer strategies and development plans. If sports clubs can create effective structures that provide volunteers with clear goals and focussed activities, there is the potential to improve club management and enhance long-term sustainability.

Limitations and future research

As a grounded theory study, it is recognised that the findings presented here are based on the substantive case of golf club volunteers. It remains beyond the scope of this study to assess whether volunteers in other sports club contexts are increasingly interpreting their role in business management terms, as distinct from other volunteers that are orientated towards the organisation of play. There may be limitations to how far these findings are transferable to other contexts. Nevertheless, this paper has attempted to provide sufficient description of the research context so that readers can make judgments about the potential transferability of the findings to another context (Guba and Lincoln 1989). Conducting similar studies in other sports club contexts would help to extend the scope of the analysis presented here.

There remains considerable scope to deepen our understanding of sports club volunteers. It may be that volunteers are presented with different contextual conditions in which they interpret their roles. Golf clubs, like many other sports club contexts, provide a rich sociological context for sports research. Interpretive research approaches may, therefore, serve researchers well in efforts to understand sports club volunteers.

Conclusion

As already identified, increased pressures on the volunteer workforce in sport clubs are increasingly significant (Nichols et al. 2015; Findlay-King et al. 2018). Developing a better understanding of how volunteers interpret their roles may help NGBs and wider political agencies engage with them to deliver policy objectives (Harris, Mori, and Collins 2009; Wilson and Platts 2018). The different understanding and interpretation of their roles by the golf club volunteers suggest that, in the face of organisational, competitive and policy pressures, there could be growing challenges in maintaining unity of purpose in sports clubs.

In the case of golf, it is clear that there is an increasing business management focus among some volunteers, with a growing emphasis on effective management and satisfying customer demand. This business-like interpretation of their role reflects is a response to the challenging operating environment faced by golf clubs. These business-orientated volunteers are increasingly distinguished from other volunteers that interpret their roles in terms of organising play. The study has also shown that some roles are more hybrid in nature and cross over into both, but that this often leads to burdensome roles and compromises the business management focus.

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