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Modelling the organisational socialisation of volunteers in English associational golf clubs

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Abstract

Research question: The research considers the organisational socialisation process for volunteers in associational golf clubs.

Research methods: Constructivist grounded theory method was used, with qualitative data collected through 28 semi-structured interviews with volunteers at English associational golf clubs.

Results and Findings: The article develops a model for the organisational socialisation of golf club volunteers. The model highlights an extended period of organisational socialisation, which locates assimilation during club membership before volunteering begins. This prior period of assimilation allows individuals to acquire organisational knowledge and make informed decisions about whether to volunteer. It also shapes their actions as volunteers and the meanings they derive from volunteering. Our findings emphasise the importance of participation among members as a precursor to volunteering. They also highlight how, in the absence of orientation support from the club, movement through the socialisation process depends on individuals' biographical assets.

Implications: The model should help golf clubs, and potentially other voluntary sports clubs, manage their organisational socialisation process to develop established members, improve volunteer recruitment and produce long-term volunteers. Improved management of this process could also enhance the diversity of both members and volunteers.

Keywords: organisational socialisation, volunteers, sports clubs, constructivist grounded theory, golf

Introduction

Sport consistently ranks as one of the largest contexts for volunteering in the Western world and voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) provide the main organisational setting (Lindsey & Mohan, 2018; Smith et al., 2017). Since VSCs formed in the nineteenth century, club members have been governing, managing and helping out in an unpaid capacity (Holt, 1990; Snape, 2018). As democratic non-profit organisations established to satisfy members' shared interest in sport, VSCs rely on volunteers to sustain themselves (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Nagel et al., 2015; Nichols, 2017).

Long-term societal changes threaten VSC sustainability. Like other grassroots voluntary associations, VSCs are at risk from declining civic participation and growing individualism (Pattie et al., 2004; Putnam, 2000). To sustain themselves, VSCs must convince enough members to volunteer (Musick & Wilson, 2008). If too many members adopt a free-rider position (Olson, 1965) and engage in 'cheque-book participation' (Pattie et al., 2004: 272), only consuming club services and not contributing as volunteers, then clubs may become unviable. Indeed, much recent research has noted how volunteer recruitment and retention is a major issue for VSCs (Groom et al., 2014; Nichols, 2017; Østerlund, 2013; Wicker, 2017).

Organisational socialisation has been shown to be a critical component to sustained volunteering across a range of voluntary contexts (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Lois, 1999; McComb, 1995; Traeger et al., 2021). However, the organisational socialisation of volunteers has not yet been studied in the context of VSCs. This article addresses this omission by exploring organisational socialisation in English associational golf clubs, which rely on volunteers to govern their clubs and organise play (Mills et al., 2021). Golf is under-researched despite having 67 million players worldwide (R&A, 2022). It is also a sociable

sport with many cultural traditions, which provides a rich sociological setting to explore the organisational socialisation process.

The following research questions drove the study:

- What is the process for the organisational socialisation of volunteers in associational golf clubs?
- How do organisational and volunteer characteristics influence the process?

In this paper, we propose a club socialisation model for volunteers, which makes two key theoretical contributions. Firstly, the model identifies an extended period of organisational socialisation with assimilation occurring during the period of club membership before volunteering begins. Secondly, we show how members pass through layers of uncertainty and understanding, which feeds through to shape their decisions to volunteer and meaningful actions as volunteers. These contributions are significant because sports management literature often overlooks the distinguishing features of VSCs in explaining sports club volunteering. Crucially, our model provides a theoretical framework to explain how membership experiences provide the foundations for sports club volunteering.

Literature Review

Organisational socialisation of volunteers

Organisational socialisation has been defined as 'the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organisational role' (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979: 211). In most theoretical models, organisational socialisation is conceptualised as a process with various stages (Kramer, 2010). The stages typically include pre-entry anticipation, newcomer and established organisational member. These stages are interspersed with transitions, which include organisational entry, assimilation, and organisational exit. While most organisational socialisation studies have been situated in the context of

employment, the same basic process is evident among volunteers (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Lois, 1999; McComb, 1995; Traeger et al., 2021).

Organisational socialisation models usually start with a pre-entry anticipatory stage, which comprises the period before joining an organisation (Kramer, 2010). This stage has only been studied in the context of a youth work organisation, where individuals often formed idealistic perceptions of the organisation due to their charitable works (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008), and it is unclear if the same expectations apply when volunteering for non-charitable organisations. The organisational entry transition has also received comparatively limited attention by scholars of volunteering. Organisational entry may comprise an initial meeting, signing a volunteer agreement and initial training (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). However, whether these same formal procedures apply to organisations where members become volunteers is unclear.

The newcomer stage covers the early months in an organisation when volunteers have much to learn (Kramer, 2010). As newcomers, volunteers possess limited knowledge about roles, relationships and organisational culture, and consequently face high levels of uncertainty (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Lois, 1999; McComb, 1995; Traeger et al., 2021). That said, familiarity with a voluntary activity, often gained in other similar organisational settings, can help individuals prepare for their new situation (Kramer, 2011). Any information gained through family and friends, education and the media may aid familiarity and reduce uncertainty. Yet, even with the benefit of prior knowledge, newcomers still have much to learn because voluntary organisations are invariably rich in values and culture. Understanding these contexts has hitherto been central to our comprehension of the challenges faced by new volunteers.

The assimilation transition involves new volunteers learning about the organisation and their role within it. Most learning occurs through training, role performance and interactions with

organisational members (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Lois, 1999; McComb, 1995; Traeger et al., 2021). The learning period sees individuals move from organisational outsider to insider, albeit progression is not necessarily linear. Different organisational contexts place different demands on newcomers' learning, ranging from accepting a strong team ethic in an emergency setting (Lois, 1999) to talking meaningfully to adolescents in a youth work setting (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). Thus, assimilation demands differ across contexts.

After a period of assimilation, individuals begin to regard themselves as established organisational members. At this stage, volunteers have a more profound knowledge of and involvement in an organisation (Kramer, 2010). In the contexts of mountain rescue (Lois, 1999) and youth support (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008), scholars have conceptualised multiple established volunteer stages to reflect progressively deeper levels of engagement. These organisational contexts, which are rich in meaning, culture and symbolism, create prolonged periods of assimilation during which volunteers move through layers of knowledge and involvement. Volunteers only develop a fuller sense of the meaning of their role after moving through these layers. Organisational context influences the nature and number of established member stages.

The final transition is organisational exit. Few studies have addressed this phase, one notable exception is the work of Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008) who discovered that organisational exit was a cause of sadness, but also relief, especially where volunteers were burnt out. Although this case highlighted the affective challenges of voluntary work and their impact on organisational exit, not all volunteering contexts may provoke the same emotional involvement.

All told, analyses of the organisational socialisation process demonstrate how, over time, events, experiences and social interactions affect volunteers' knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and emotions. At the same time, research has shown how organisational context

influences the organisational socialisation process. However, the range of contexts in which the organisational socialisation of volunteers has been researched is limited. Studied contexts include traveller assistance (McComb, 1995), mountain rescue (Lois, 1999), youth work (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008) and refugee support (Traeger et al., 2021). The studied contexts involve voluntary organisations delivering services to third parties. Organisational socialisation theory may not necessarily transfer to the VSC context because VSCs differ in delivering services to members from whom volunteers are drawn. Thus, whilst organisational socialisation is a critical component for sustained volunteering, it remains unclear how organisational socialisation theory applies to volunteering in VSCs.

Organisational socialisation in VSCs

Literature has covered various aspects of socialisation in sport, including young people's socialisation (MacPhail & Kirk, 2006), initiation rituals (Crow & Macintosh, 2009), social integration (Ulseth, 2004) and social exclusion (Lake, 2013). However, there is no study into the organisational socialisation of volunteers in VSCs. Given the vital role played by volunteers in running VSCs, the absence of research on how organisational socialisation influences volunteer recruitment and performance represents a significant gap in knowledge.

VSCs are commonly defined as having: an organisational purpose to satisfy members' shared interest in a sport; a democratic organisational constitution; a voluntary membership; members acting in a voluntary capacity; self-governing independence; and rules to prevent the distribution of financial surpluses to members (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Horch, 1994; Nagel et al., 2015; Nichols, 2017). Although VSCs rely on volunteers, not all members are volunteers. It is important to distinguish between being a member and a volunteer of a voluntary organisation (Musick & Wilson, 2008). A member may be active in the sense that they engage in club activities - such as participating in club events, attending the annual general meeting, and reading club communications – but they are not necessarily involved in

producing goods and services. Volunteers in VSCs typically meet accepted definitions of volunteering because they undertake their activity freely, without the expectation of remuneration, and within the context of a formally constituted organisation that aims to benefit other individuals or a community (Cnaan et al., 1996).

In VSCs, sporting participation and organisational membership typically precede volunteering (Hallmann, 2015). Indeed, length of membership tends to correlate with whether individuals volunteer (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013). A period of membership allows time for social relationships, emotional ties and a sense of belonging to develop, which stimulates voluntary engagement (Cuskelly & O'Brien, 2013; Nichols et al., 2012; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013). It seems reasonable to suppose that membership experiences have an influence on subsequent volunteering. What remains unclear, however, is exactly how membership experiences feed through into volunteering.

Associational golf clubs offer an important and rich sociological context for studying the organisational socialisation of volunteers. There are just under a thousand associational golf clubs in England and, despite there being an estimated 44,000 golf club volunteers, they have received minimal research attention (Mills et al., 2021). Unlike their commercial and municipal counterparts, associational golf clubs meet the common definition of VSCs noted above. Within these clubs, volunteers perform important governance roles and organise competitive play (Mills et al., 2021). Most golf clubs are rich in tradition and culture, with many founded over a century ago (Holt, 1990). Golf is also a sociable sport in which players spend time talking to others, both on the course and in the clubhouse. Altogether, the rich culture and social relationships within golf clubs offer a suitable context to explore the process of organisational socialisation.

Research method: constructivist grounded theory

Constructivist grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2014) was chosen for our research. This qualitative research method is based on constructivist epistemological foundations and offers a rigorous approach to constructing conceptual frameworks or theories through the inductive analysis of data. We were reluctant to use a deductive approach that imported theory because existing organisational socialisation theories had been developed in non-sporting contexts (Doherty, 2013) that lacked a membership dynamic. Our preference was to develop an abstract understanding of the organisational socialisation of golf club volunteers 'located in time, place and the situation of inquiry' (Charmaz, 2014: 342). Grounded theory is also excellent for studying processes (Orlikowski, 1993). As such our choice of method aligns well with the 'coherence' quality criteria for qualitative research as outlined by Tracy (2010). Furthermore, the constructivist strand of grounded theory is well suited to sports, exercise and health research (Sparkes and Smith, 2014).

We used theoretical sampling to seek out relevant 'slices of data' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 65), and arranged multiple data collection phases to move iteratively between data gathering and data analysis. Theoretical sampling involves deciding where to sample from next and a data 'slice' can come from any collected data – the key thing is that its relevance is determined on analytic grounds (Glaser 1978). Through the process of theoretical sampling, the scope and/or density of theory can be extended. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest theoretical sampling for more data from unlike groups (to extend the scope of the theory) and on unsaturated concepts (to add density) as a basis for building the theory in one direction or another.

England Golf helped us to find an initial golf club with a long history and tradition of volunteering. After this first phase of data collection, we pursued further data that would help

us to develop emergent conceptual categories (i.e. the stages and transitions of organisational socialisation). As part of our theoretical sampling, we also deliberately selected different types of golf club (e.g. location, history, strategic orientation, demographics, culture) and volunteers (e.g. gender, age, playing biography, length of membership) to understand how concepts worked with different club and volunteer characteristics. We varied our sample in this way because our initial and ongoing analysis of data suggested that changing these characteristics would yield different volunteer experiences. Altogether, we undertook four phases of data collection, which are summarised in Table 1. Data collection stopped after the fourth phase, when 'theoretical saturation' was reached (Charmaz, 2014), with data analysis no longer generating fresh insights that would cause us to revise our emergent theory.

We collected data via semi-structured interviews with 28 golf club volunteers to explore their past and current personal experiences, perspectives and meanings in a gently guided conversation. Interviewees were selected with the cooperation of key contacts within each golf club and England Golf, who were able to identify volunteers meeting our chosen theoretical sampling characteristics, as noted above. These choices are reflected in the final sample summarised in Table 2. In accordance with the inductive approach of the constructivist grounded theory method, the interview schedule was lightly structured (Charmaz, 2014). A series of open-ended questions gently guided participants to describe their journey from starting to play golf, joining their club, experiencing membership, and then becoming a volunteer. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews typically lasted 45-60 minutes, although some lasted 90 minutes.

INSERT TABLES 1&2

We used constructivist grounded theory coding techniques to make sense of the data (Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding was used to describe and label short textual passages from the interview transcripts. The lead author constantly compared coded data looking for both

similarities and difference. Focussed coding was then used to select and group together those initial codes that demonstrated the most analytical strength. This analysis led to the formation of key conceptual categories. Theoretical coding was then used to develop plausible relationships between conceptual categories and thus build a theoretical model (Urquhart, 2019). NVivo v.11 software was used for all coding. The result of the coding procedure is a process model that shows the relationship between a series of conceptual categories that describe the stages and transitions of organisational socialisation, with each conceptual category underpinned by multiple instances of coded data.

Recognising the subjective role of researchers, the lead author engaged in reflexivity to scrutinise how his interests, experiences and assumptions influenced the research and the construction of theory (Charmaz, 2014). As he was not a golfer, this reflexivity tended to surface assumptions about golf clubs, which were ameliorated by familiarisation with the golf club context.

Findings on the club socialisation of volunteers

Figure 1 presents our model for the organisational socialisation of volunteers in English associational golf clubs. The model illustrates the stages and transitions typically experienced by golf club volunteers. Importantly, it shows how much of the socialisation process occurs before volunteering takes place. We discuss each stage and transition below.

INSERT FIG.1

Stage one: Choosing a club

The journey to becoming a golf club volunteer begins upon joining a golf club. Our analysis, especially of the 13 volunteers that joined less than 10 years ago, shows that the decision to become a golf club member usually involved both golfing and social considerations. With golfing considerations, location was often important, with a local course facilitating regular

and easy access. Course quality was also important, especially to better golfers. Where individuals had prior golfing experience, they could play as a visitor and assess the club's facilities. Several local clubs were often considered.

Interviewees discussed various social considerations that influenced their choices. When family, friends or work colleagues were already members, it acted as a strong draw. Some interviewees avoided overly traditional golf clubs and excessive uncertainties around behavioural expectations. For example, one interviewee described his choice of golf club:

> *I joined this club because I didn't fancy anything too formal. I wanted something more reasonably relaxed. I didn't really want the sneering noses and wearing blazers on a Sunday. [C3]*

Significantly, when choosing a golf club, interviewees were not thinking about being a volunteer. Such considerations came later. At the choosing stage, the considerations were about golf and whether the club would provide 'a good fit'.

The joining transition

The process of joining a golf club has changed over recent decades. A couple of long-standing members remembered being interviewed by a panel of club officials. However, most clubs have dispensed with such practice and simply require submission of a membership application form. In some cases, applications required the support of two existing members, but even that practice is in decline. Clubs are removing barriers to membership to create simplified entry. As one interviewee described:

> *I joined the club. There was nothing to it really. It was all surprisingly easy. No interview or anything like that. [B4]*

That said, the loss of an interview and other induction activities meant new joiners had less opportunity to acquire organisational knowledge and form relationships. Some interviewees

recalled a lack of orientation support on joining and said they would have benefitted from some initial guidance.

Stage two: New member

On joining a golf club, interviewees faced a range of uncertainties. They were unfamiliar with their club's behavioural norms and complex social networks. For new golfers, there were also fears around playing golf. These apprehensions are described below.

Within golf clubs, there are shared expectations of how members should behave. These expectations are formed by members as they interact with one another and through the establishment of club rules. For example, on the course, members are expected to follow golfing etiquette such as wearing appropriate clothing, maintaining a good pace of play, repairing pitch-marks and raking bunkers after use. In the clubhouse, members are usually expected to act with decorum and observe the dress code. Golfers were observed to comment on 'maintaining standards' and 'not letting standards slip'.

New members may only become aware of behavioural norms when they break them. For example, one female interviewee said:

> *When I first joined somebody said to me, "Oh god, you're going to be a pain. Look at those trainers." I had these flowery trainers on that I thought were quite cool. [C5]*

Some behavioural norms are codified through club rules and regulations. Although codification has the potential to help new members understand what is expected of them, the codes themselves sometimes contain ambiguities. For example, a dress code instructed golfers to wear only 'recognised golf attire and footwear' [Club D], which presumes an objective understanding of acceptable clothing.

Overall, lack of familiarity, and the uncertainty this induced, was greatest among those interviewees that had taken up golf as an adult and had limited prior knowledge of golf clubs. One female, who had not been playing golf long when joining her club, explained:

> *There is a supposition that you know what you're signing up for. If you've never actually been in the club and been involved with it, well, how does it work? [C7]*

Prior experience as a member at other golf clubs tended to reduce new member anxieties. Experienced golfers were usually familiar with the broad range of practices commonly found within golf clubs. This included golfers that had returned to golf in their adult life, having learnt the game as a junior. Experienced golfers only needed to develop an understanding of the particularities of their new club.

Interviewees described how, as new members, they had to deal with relational uncertainties. Golf clubs are characterised by a complex network of social relationships. With large memberships, various formal playing sections and lots of small informal playing groups, new members can feel on the periphery. One club chairman described the intricacies:

> *There's lots of little groups, and in some places they could be cliques, but the groups are like little Venn diagrams basically. [A1]*

New members faced uncertainties around whom to develop social relations with. These uncertainties applied regardless of whether a new member was an experienced golfer. For example, one accomplished golfer described his discomfort at a previous club:

> *I was there for just over two years and I only ever played in the same four-ball. I never ever got invited to play in another group - never got approached…..Yeah, I wasn't overly comfortable there. [E3]*

Some interviewees described uncertainties around playing golf, especially if they had been new to the game and had limited golfing ability. As newcomers, they felt anxious about playing badly and being shown up. They worried about holding up play and being told to 'hurry up' or let other golfers through. They fretted about breaking the rules of golf. One interviewee described how she had joined the golf club with two friends, having previously played at an informal local municipal course. She described how a lack of confidence in their golfing abilities led them to avoid contact with other golfers:

> *The three of us would come down late in the evenings. Out of sight! We were frightened of getting involved in the golf club. We used to park up at the far end of the car park and zip on to the course to play nine holes and back in the car and out. We never ever came in the clubhouse. We got people coming up to say, "When are you going to get your handicaps?" Very scary. We just thought it was very scary. [D1]*

Overall, female golfers with less experience and confidence tended to describe higher levels of anxiety about playing golf when joining their club. Some female interviewees spoke about how, despite significant efforts by the golf industry and golf clubs to be more welcoming to women, they still felt under surveillance in a male-dominated environment.

The 'settling in' transition

After talking about new member experiences, interviewees were asked to reflect on how they had adapted to their new golf club environment. Interviewees typically described how social interaction and developing golfing confidence hastened their transition towards feeling comfortable within their golf club. Several interviewees referred to this process as 'settling in'. It was principally through interactions with other members that interviewees learnt how their golf club worked and what meanings were attached to the club's cultural practices. By

observing and talking to existing members, interviewees developed an understanding of cultural practices. They learnt how to ‘fit in’.

Finding a group of members to play and socialise with was a central feature of socialisation. Golf club members form themselves into a variety of different groups. Groups could be informal such as occasional gatherings of friends or family, or semi-formal such as like-minded members organising regular weekly games. Groups could also be formal such as club teams or regular players in the weekly competitions. Most groups comprise established members and tend to enact the normative practices of the golf club.

Finding a suitable group could be difficult, especially if a new member does not know anyone in the club. Opportunities to integrate may be limited. However, as one interviewee explained, when a group is found the process of socialisation can build quickly:

> *When I joined the first couple of years, I didn’t know many people. I mean, it sounds a long time, but I was busy as well, so it didn’t really matter. Then, it was one January, there was a Burns Night supper here. I came with my wife…, "get yourself down here tomorrow morning, 9.30, you've got a game." There was a group called The Slugs and they meet every Wednesday morning and Saturday morning and I’ve never looked back. [D3]*

Where interviewees knew family, friends or work colleagues who were already members, this provided immediate access to playing partners. As one interviewee put it, “*I already knew a few of the lads” [E4]*. This lubricated the formation of social connections through introductions to other members and accelerated the transition from the periphery towards the centre of the club’s social network.

The transition towards feeling comfortable was easier when new members had confidence in their golfing knowledge and abilities. Crucially, confidence affected the degree of

participation possible. Confident golfers were more willing to play with people they did not know, including in competitions which provided opportunities to meet other members and extend social networks. For example, one interviewee, who had played a lot of junior golf and maintained his golfing ability, described how playing competitive golf quickly expanded his social relationships:

> *Our club has a lot of roll-ups where everyone just turns up and you all get drawn against each other. They're great because you can just turn up and you play different people each week, and very quickly you meet a lot of people. The two ways I got involved in the club very quickly was that, and by playing in knock-outs, so you meet new people every time you played in a match. [E6]*

The amount of time it took interviewees to 'settle in' varied. In some cases, individuals felt comfortable within a matter of months. For others, it took several years.

It is worth noting that not all new members 'settle in'. Since this research studied golf club volunteers, interviewees had successfully transitioned to feeling comfortable in their clubs. However, interviewees described how they had failed to integrate at previous clubs. They also spoke about other new members failing to integrate. From these stories, it was apparent that progression towards feeling comfortable was seldom seamless.

Stage three: Established member

After a period of settling in, interviewees described how they eventually began to feel comfortable within their golf club. Regular group participation was central to this feeling because playing with others provided reliable and enjoyable social interactions. Invariably, group participation was intertwined with a routine involving regular playing times and pre- or post-golf food and drink. For example:

> *I got into a regular group, probably about ten of us that went out fairly regularly. That became routine. We'd play at the weekend and we'd play Wednesday. In the winter, we'd have a bacon sandwich and then go out in the afternoon. In the summer, we arrived at teatime so that people who are still working could come out and we played during the evening. [D2]*

Through regular participation, members grew comfortable with their surroundings. Whereas the golf club's cultural practices may have been a source of uncertainty as a newcomer, as an established member these same practices provided an agreeable framework in which to pursue their golfing hobby.

Virtually every interviewee described their golf club as 'welcoming and friendly'. That said, reflective interviewees could recall how they first perceived the golf club when joining and recognised that their perspective had changed. A period of 'settling in' had helped them to feel comfortable among other members and with the club's way of doing things. As one interviewee acknowledged, the golf club may not feel friendly to today's newcomers:

> *I know I can come down here anytime and there will be somebody to talk to. There'll be somebody I know or a person behind the bar even, you know everybody. It's just such a great friendly place but it doesn't have that aspect from looking into it from outside, you've got to get in. [D1]*

The activation transition

Becoming an established member created the foundations for deeper involvement, although the transition into volunteering needed activating. Our analysis suggests that activation was usually rooted in social relationships and an informed understanding of the golf club.

For most interviewees, the decision to volunteer was made after they had been asked to volunteer for a specific role. Invitations were usually made by an existing volunteer on behalf

of a club committee. An invitation to volunteer was, therefore, contingent on the invitee having formed sufficient social networks within the club and being known to others. This was summed up nicely by one interviewee:

> *I think because I integrated so well, I came to the attention of the men's committee. They're always looking for individuals willing to help out. [C4]*

Interviewees often perceived the invitation to volunteer was made because existing volunteers knew they possessed relevant skills and experience. For example, one interviewee described her activation transition:

> *Once I had started to play a bit more and got involved [with the Ladies section]…… people realised that I had worked in accounts for, well I wouldn't call it a career, but for a living [laughter], and they needed a treasurer for the ladies section. So, I was asked to join the committee as the treasurer. [A4]*

Interviewees were often flattered by an invitation to volunteer. The invitation was tacit recognition that they were now an accepted and established member of the club.

For a minority of interviewees, the route into volunteering was activated when they put themselves forward for a role. This was possible because they had felt comfortable within the club and knew with whom to speak. For example, one interviewee explained:

> *After two or three years, seeing what was going on….I volunteered to go on the board. I knew somebody who had been a member a long time, who had been vice-captain. She was almost a sponsor for me….I think if you have a sponsor or somebody that can show you the way in or get you in, that helps. [D2]*

For many golf club roles, especially board and committee roles, volunteers are elected from among the membership, typically at the Annual General Meeting. The process usually

involves informal discussions between existing volunteers and prospective volunteers in advance of the meeting. Elections are often uncontested, with preferred candidates having been suitably primed.

On the rare occasions when elections were contested, having strong social networks within the club was important. One interview talked about upcoming elections to the club's governing body, which were hotly contested given recent difficulties at the club. As a long-standing member with extensive relationships, she was well-placed to get elected:

> *Will I get elected? A lot of people have said, "you've got my vote". [B1]*

Whether individuals were asked or whether they put themselves forward, the establishment of good social relations within the club was a common factor in becoming a volunteer. There was a shared understanding between prospective and existing volunteers that they were reliable club members with something useful to contribute.

By the activation phase, interviewees were established members and familiar with their golf club's structure, activities and accepted behaviours. They were well-placed to understand the roles and responsibilities of volunteers within their golf club. As one interview said, 'I knew what I was letting myself in for' [C7]. They were also well-placed to understand the significance of volunteer roles and took this into account when making decisions. For example, one interviewee said that being asked to be club captain was 'an honour' and consequently 'did think seriously about it because obviously, if I was going to do the job, I wanted to make sure I was doing it properly' [A5]. The decision to volunteer was, therefore, informed.

The decision to decline a volunteer role could be just as well-informed. Respect for the club, including its members and traditions, meant that some volunteers had turned down other roles. Similarly, some interviewees had been deterred by knowing the requirements of certain

roles. For example, when one young female volunteer in her 20s was asked if she would like to become a board member, her response was clear:

> *I see what [board members] do and what they have to put up with, and it puts me off taking on a more serious governance role. Making decisions for the whole of the club, I wouldn't want to do that on a voluntary basis. [E2]*

Stage four: Volunteer

There was compelling evidence that interviewees regarded their volunteering as significant and worthwhile. Volunteering was meaningful because it was rooted in established membership. Interviewees often described their contribution as a volunteer as 'giving back'. For example, one interviewee described the enjoyment he got from his role as club captain:

> *When you have three times the number of players compared to three years ago and a clubhouse full of people for big presentations, it was just as you pictured the golf club would've been back in the '80s or '90s when there was a waiting list for membership and stuff like that. It was really rewarding to have a golf club full of people having a great time. That's why I was always a member there and so I just wanted to make that happen for our members. [E6]*

Volunteers were usually keen to sustain the golf club's practices. In becoming established members, they had adapted to their club's way of doing things. The desire to maintain traditions was particularly strong among those members with long-standing golfing and membership histories. That is not to say, however, that established members found all aspects of golf club life agreeable. Some volunteers sought to make changes in their voluntary role. Feeling comfortable as a member had given interviewees the chance to think less about how they fitted in and more about how the golf club could be improved.

Pursuing change and innovation was most common among volunteers with short membership and playing biographies. These volunteers more readily remembered the initial uncertainties and challenges they had encountered as new members. It was when these experiences had been problematic that interviewees considered more deeply the changes they wanted to see. Although socialised into the ways of the golf club, socialisation was not necessarily wholesale. It was possible to enjoy being a member and participate in common practices, but also pursue change. The desire to reshape the golf club is illustrated by a ladies' section captain who felt that golf clubs tend to favour strong competitive golfers. She had been a golfer for less than 10 years and was a self-certified weak golfer. She described how, on taking up her captaincy, she planned to support other less able golfers:

> *One thing I felt strongly about was that [less able golfers] are not always as visibly supported and valued. One thing I really wanted to do was to make as much of a fuss of them as the more elite players. I felt that was important. [C7]*

The goals set by volunteers were linked to their socially situated understanding of the golf club and their own experiences as members. This gave purpose and meaning to their voluntary efforts.

Discussion and conclusion

Theoretical implications

Drawing on this study of associational golf clubs, our key contribution is a model of organisational socialisation for VSCs. Importantly, our model shows how golf club volunteers pass through an extended organisational socialisation period as members before becoming volunteers. Individuals started their journey at the *choosing a club* stage when they considered what golf club would suit them. The *joining* transition was often short, with

limited barriers to entry and an absence of club support to aid orientation. At the *new member* stage, individuals felt uncertain about club behavioural norms, social relationships and playing golf. The transition from newcomer to established member involved *settling in*, which was facilitated by newcomers forming relations with other members and developing golfing confidence. At the *established member* stage, golfers felt comfortable at the golf club, with group relationships anchoring participation. The transition from established member to volunteer was *activated* through social relationships and an understanding of the club, which fostered informed decisions about volunteering. This extended organisational socialisation process meant that actions taken at the *volunteer* stage were meaningful.

Our model shares similarities with other models in showing how volunteers experience different levels of uncertainty, understanding and involvement as they pass through multiple stages and transitions of an organisational socialisation process (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Lois, 1999; McComb, 1995). There are, however, differences, which are summarised in Table 3.

INSERT TABLE 3

Assimilation during the period of club membership before volunteering begins is a distinguishing feature of our model. In previously studied contexts, volunteers had limited experience of the organisation when they commenced volunteering, so most learning about the organisation and volunteer roles occurred during training and role performance (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Lois, 1999; McComb, 1995; Traeger et al., 2021). However, in associational golf clubs, members accumulated experience and understanding of the organisation and volunteer roles before they started volunteering. This analysis is consistent with knowing that VSC volunteers typically come from among a club's membership (Hallmann, 2015). Thus, our model shows that the accumulation of organisational knowledge

as members before volunteering begins is materially different to the in-role socialisation of volunteers in service delivery organisations.

By learning about the golf club as members, individuals could make informed decisions about whether to take on a volunteer role. Established members faced limited uncertainty when choosing to become a volunteer and could form realistic expectations about an impending role. High levels of organisational knowledge are less common among new volunteers in service delivery contexts (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Lois, 1999; Traeger et al., 2021). Volunteers in service delivery contexts are reliant on pre-entry anticipatory socialisation and orientation programmes when preparing for a volunteer role and are comparatively ill-informed.

The prior membership period seems to explain why we found just one volunteering stage. Other models for the organisational socialisation of volunteers have tended to identify several post-newcomer stages to reflect increasing levels of understanding and involvement (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Lois, 1999). However, there is just one volunteer stage in our club socialisation model. Indeed, several of our interviewees went straight into major volunteer roles, such as club captaincy or board member, and they coped well with this. Thus, in a VSC context, the established member stage seems to act as an adequate platform for building the organisational knowledge and understanding necessary to perform a volunteer role.

This study's findings suggest that the extended period of socialisation shapes the meaning of volunteering and the contribution that members make as volunteers, which is consistent with prior research (Cuskelly & O'Brien, 2013; Darcy et al., 2014; Misener et al., 2010). Golf club volunteers believed they were making a meaningful contribution by 'giving back', sustaining traditions and making changes to address issues they had personally encountered. In community settings rich with normative behaviour and social relationships, explanations of

volunteering are not readily reduced to the psychological motivations of individuals. Rather, volunteering has sociological roots that imbue voluntary action with a deep sense of meaning.

Our findings show how volunteering was an unexpected outcome of participation, which only emerged as a possibility through organisational socialisation. Volunteering was not a goal when individuals first joined the club. Rather, the route into volunteering had an element of happenstance about it. For this reason, it is perhaps more useful to talk of participation and volunteer 'pathways' (Brodie et al., 2011) rather than 'careers'(Cuskelly et al., 2002; Ronkainen et al., 2020) because the latter implies a degree of intention, planning and progression that is not always present. The notion of pathways resonates with life course volunteering theory, which argues that the types of activities and organisations people participate in change through the life course, and that unexpected events, social relationships and social environments shape volunteering (Hogg, 2016; Lindsey & Mohan, 2018; Omoto et al., 2000). Our findings similarly locate volunteerism in the context of the social groups and cultural settings in which individuals participate and construct meaning.

Life-course theory also resonates with how personal biography and organisational setting interweave to influence movement through the club socialisation process. Relevant biographical assets, including those accumulated through prior golfing experiences, reduced new member uncertainties and aided golfers' progression through the club socialisation process. With its heavy reliance on forming social relationships to support the key transitions of settling in and activation, the club socialisation process tends to assimilate individuals similar to existing members. In other words, the process favours those that can readily assimilate, which may limit volunteer diversity. This offers some insight into why people with particular demographic and socio-economic characteristics, such as men with higher income and socio-economic status, are more likely to volunteer in golf clubs (Mills et al. 2021) and many other VSCs (Hallmann, 2015; Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; Taylor et al.,

2012). The influence of biographical assets on navigating the organisational socialisation process appears to be greater in golf clubs compared to charitable service delivery organisations (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Lois, 1999; McComb, 1995; Traeger et al., 2021). Thus, we conclude that although organisational characteristics shape the stages and transitions of the club socialisation process, in the absence of strong club support measures, an individual's movement through that process will rely on biographical assets.

Our theoretical model is significant because it integrates the experience of being a member with that of being a volunteer. It shows how becoming a volunteer within a club is shaped by the social and cultural setting and by how members navigate it. Our model adds a valuable theoretical framework to sports literature that emphasises the importance of understanding membership experiences as a foundation for volunteering.

Implications for policy and practice

Volunteers play a fundamental role in the delivery of sport policies at a national, regional and local level (Harris et al., 2009) and multiple policy-makers seek insights to shape sports volunteering (Sport Australia, 2021; Sport England, 2017; Sport New Zealand, 2014). Our research offers a new model that is grounded in data and is already shaping practice in golf clubs in England (England Golf, 2021) and should prove useful to the R&A which aims to expand worldwide participation and engagement in golf (R&A, 2021). As governments increasingly asks NGBs and VSCs to deliver social policy goals, our model offers a useful means to integrate interventions on participation and volunteering.

Our model has can help golf clubs, and potentially other VSCs, manage the organisational socialisation process to develop established members, improve volunteer recruitment and retain more long-term volunteers. Our findings suggest that golf clubs could do more to support new members to settle in and encourage the activation of established members. We

found limited evidence of clubs using orientation and engagement tactics to support members through these key transition phases. Drawing on established tactics for the organisational socialisation of volunteers (Traeger et al., 2021), we suggest that golf clubs could help new members to settle in by providing: a comprehensive induction programme; training on rules and etiquette; and, opportunities to form relationships with other members through buddying schemes and new member groups. Golf clubs could also support volunteer activation by seeking to engage more members in club affairs and publicising volunteer vacancies throughout the club. Thus, promoting volunteering becomes less about selling the benefits of volunteering and more about promoting participation, involvement and belonging among members (Nichols et al., 2019). Approaching volunteer recruitment in this way has benefits not just for volunteering but member retention more generally.

Reflections and future research

Whilst grounded theories are bounded by temporal and contextual factors (Charmaz, 2014), our club socialisation model may have transferability to other VSCs. Associational golf clubs share many features with other VSCs and most VSC volunteers experience their clubs as members before they volunteer. Further research into the organisational socialisation of volunteers in other sports, including in other nations, is needed to explore transferability.

Extended periods of organisational socialisation present some research challenges. Whilst it is helpful to research distinct stages of organisational socialisation (Traeger et al., 2021), we must not lose sight of the full process. What happens in early stages affects later stages. Yet, following individuals longitudinally may be impracticable, especially when organisational membership spans many years. This study relied on volunteers' retrospective accounts and other research may have to do the same.

Our research focussed on current volunteers and could not consider organisational exit. Whilst other scholars have extended the organisational socialisation processes to include the exit stage (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008), a relatively short timeframe between organisational entry and exit made that possible. We were also constrained by researching the experiences of individuals that successfully transitioned to volunteering. However, not every golfer navigates the entire organisational socialisation process, indicating that the process is rarely benign. Organisational exit at VSCs is likely to include several alternatives including: exiting the organisation altogether; or, stepping down from a volunteer role but remaining a member. The potential organisational exit options, which are highlighted in Figure 2, would benefit from further exploration.

INSERT FIG.2

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Table 1 – The characteristics of associational golf clubs included in this study

	Phase 1	**Phase 2**		**Phase 3**	**Phase 4**
Club	A	B	C	D	Nationwide sampling of younger volunteers
Location	Southern England	Northern England	Midlands	Northern England	Various
Club history	100+ years	100+ years	Under 30-years	100+ years	Various
Strategic orientation	Top-end	Struggling, poor local area	Accessible	Mid-market	Various
Members fee (per month)	£130	£50	£50	£60	Various
Member demographic	Older, male, affluent	Mixed	Mixed	Older, male	Various
Culture	Traditional	Traditional, tight core community	Relaxed atmosphere	Gradually relaxing traditions	Various
Volunteers interviewed	6	4	7	4	7

Table 2 - Research participants' characteristics

Characteristics	Research participants	
	No.	%
Gender		
Male	19	68%
Female	9	32%
Age		
18-40	7	25%
40-60	6	21%
Over-60	15	54%
Golfing biography		
Played continuously since junior	8	29%
Started as junior, stopped but returned as adult	9	32%
Learnt to play as adult	11	39%
Length of golf club membership		
Under 10 years	13	46%
11-20 years	7	25%
Over 20 years	8	29%

Table 3 – Differences in the organisational socialisation of volunteers

Club socialisation of volunteers	**Organisational socialisation of volunteers**	**Differences**
Choosing a club	Pre-entry anticipatory	In service delivery organisations, individuals anticipate what volunteering will be like. When choosing a club, individuals anticipate membership and aren't thinking about volunteering.
Joining	Organisational entry	Entering an organisation as a volunteer involves more immediate responsibilities and so induction procedures tend to be greater. Joining a club has a lower threshold because it only involves becoming a member.
New member	Newcomer volunteer	Uncertainties around behavioural norms, relationships and tasks are common in both models. However, task uncertainty for newcomer volunteers relates to the volunteer role, whereas new members are mainly concerned with the sporting activity.
Settling in	Assimilation	Assimilation in many voluntary contexts occurs whilst performing the volunteer role. In contrast, settling in at a club occurs during membership prior to volunteering.
Established member	-	This stage is peculiar to membership-based organisations, where individuals accumulate organisational knowledge and relationships as members.
Volunteer	Established volunteer (two stages)	We found one volunteer stage because individuals acquired organisational knowledge as members before volunteering. In non-membership voluntary contexts, there is often more than one established volunteer stage, which reflect shallow and deeper levels of organisational understanding.
-	Organisational exit	Our study didn't cover organisational exit.

Figure 1 - Theoretical model of the organisational socialisation of volunteers in English associational golf clubs

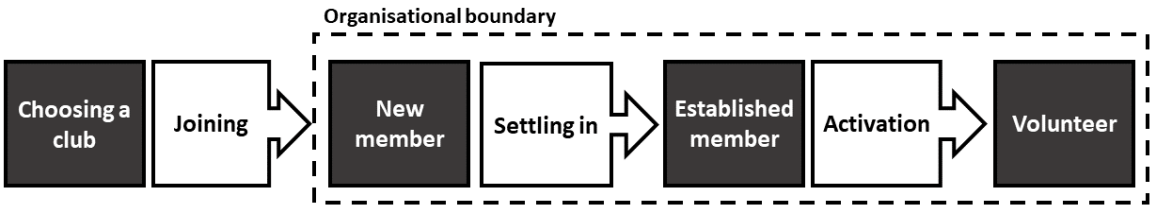
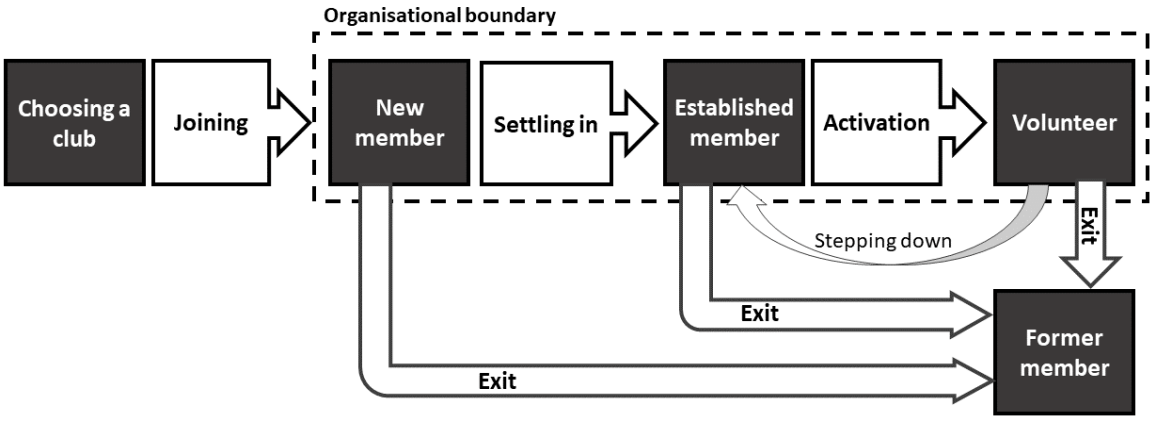
Figure 2 - Theoretical model of the organisational socialisation of volunteers in English associational golf clubs – extended to incorporate potential exit transitions