

## Learning From the Experiences of Older Adult Volunteers in Sport: A Serious Leisure Perspective

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### Abstract

A sample of older adult volunteers ( $N = 20$ , 65 years and older) in community sport organizations was interviewed in order to understand their experiences with volunteering. An interdisciplinary framework of serious leisure, older adult volunteering, and older adult leisure was used to interpret the findings. Volunteering in this context was found to be consistent with serious leisure based on characteristics such as substantial involvement, strong identification with the activity, and the need to persevere. Older adults viewed their experience as extremely positive, enabling them to make a meaningful contribution and to receive several benefits of participation. The most frequently noted negative experience was interpersonal relations, yet overall, this was not enough to drive participants away from this activity. Implications for enhancing older adult volunteering are discussed and avenues for future research are provided.

*KEYWORDS: Older adults, serious leisure, volunteering, community sport organizations*

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## Introduction

Trends such as early retirement and increased longevity are expanding the number of years and the proportion of people's lives spent in retirement, and thus increasing the amount of available leisure time for older adults (Chambre, 1987; Stebbins, 2000; Warbuton, Terry, Rosenman, & Shapiro, 2001). Recent research has focused on post-retirement and the leisure habits and preferences of this demographic (e.g., Gibson, Ashton-Shaeffer, Green, & Autry, 2003/2004; Guinn, 1999; Nimrod, 2007a,b). This research indicates that older adults desire meaningful leisure experiences in order to improve their overall life satisfaction during retirement (Gibson et al., 2003/2004; Nimrod, 2007a). Specifically, older adults find leisure opportunities that give them choice in what they do (Craike & Coleman, 2005; Robertson, 2005), provide them with a challenge (Guinn, 1999; Nimrod, 2007a), and facilitate social interaction (Gibson et al., 2003/2004; Iwasaki & Smale, 1998) to be most meaningful and satisfying.

Volunteering is one leisure activity that has been shown to enhance the mental, physical, emotional, and social well-being of older adults by giving them an opportunity for personal growth and social interaction, and a sense of purpose and productivity (Gill, 2006; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Van Willigen, 2000). Although Roadburg (1985) questioned the notion that volunteering is a form of leisure for older adults, a theoretical connection between leisure and volunteering among older adults has been noted (Chambre, 1987; Fischer & Schaffer, 1993; Stebbins, 2000). It may be assumed that benefits can be derived particularly from volunteering as serious leisure, defined as systematic involvement in an activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the individual to find extended involvement there in the acquisition and/or expression of particular skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 1982).

This paper draws on Stebbins' (1982) concept of serious leisure as well as the literature on older adult volunteering and older adult leisure to interpret the experiences of older adults in the context of community sport volunteering. The literature on volunteering among older adults has also taken an occupational lens, as some have argued that volunteering represents a continuation of and substitution for work (e.g., Cohen-Mansfield, 1989; Roadburg, 1985; Wilcock, 1993). However, evidence from several contexts suggests that a serious leisure perspective is particularly useful for understanding volunteering (e.g., Orr, 2006; Stebbins, 1998). The current paper helps to connect and build on the areas of serious leisure, older adult volunteering, and older adult leisure. These three conceptual and theoretical bodies of literature are described below. The paper also provides insight into how volunteering experiences can be enhanced and thus provide a meaningful way to enrich the quality of life for older adults.

## Theoretical Background

### *Volunteering as Serious Leisure*

The conception of volunteering as leisure in general is based on the premise of volunteering as non-coerced activity with relative freedom to honor commitments, or flexible obligation (Stebbins, 1996, 2000, 2004). Volunteering as leisure

is a complex pursuit that enables people to find personal meaning and identity, and to explore their needs, interests, and social and political values through action (Arai, 2004). The focus of the current paper is continual, organizationally-based volunteering, which is consistent with Stebbins' (1982) original conceptualization of serious leisure. According to Stebbins, this form of volunteering entails systematic and substantial involvement where an individual can acquire and/or express particular skills, knowledge, and experience. As one type of serious leisure activity volunteering may be defined by six distinctive qualities that have been empirically validated by several studies (e.g., Arai, 2000; Gibson, Willming & Holdnak, 2002; Gould, Moore, McGuire, & Stebbins, 2008; Nichols & King, 1999; Orr, 2006): (1) the occasional need to persevere, (2) the tendency for participants to find a career in the endeavor, (3) significant personal effort, (4) strong identification with their chosen pursuit, (5) durable benefits realized from participation, and (6) a unique ethos associated with the leisure pursuit (Stebbins, 2001).<sup>1</sup> Volunteering as serious leisure is also consistent with career volunteering (Stebbins, 1996), and is characterized by continuous, substantial helping and dedication, rather than a one-time exchange of services or monetary resources (Stebbins, 2005). It is further defined as a recurring skill and knowledge-based activity that provides volunteers with a career in a special social world. Most often, career volunteering tends to be linked to an organization (Orr, 2006). In a study of community sport volunteers, Cuskelly, Harrington, and Stebbins (2002/2003) confirmed the link between serious leisure and career volunteering, and found that career volunteers demonstrated a stronger commitment to their organization than marginal or casual volunteers.

According to Stebbins (2005, p. 186), "the drive to find fulfillment in serious leisure is the drive to experience the rewards of a given leisure activity," and research on volunteering as serious leisure has revealed that distinctive rewards or benefits are gained from that activity. Career volunteers enjoy the personal rewards (e.g., self-actualization, self-expression, personal enrichment, financial return) and social rewards (e.g., social interaction, group accomplishment) inherent in any serious leisure activity (Stebbins, 2001). These rewards can motivate a participant to continue the activity as they find the rewards fulfilling and desire to repeat the experience (Stebbins, 2005). While the rewards of serious leisure in general predominantly reflect self-interest, Stebbins (1998, 2001) noted that altruism is also conceived of as a reward by career volunteers. Indeed, studies of career volunteers have shown that they perceive themselves as not only reaping personal benefits, but also making a contribution to their various communities and to society (Orr, 2006; Stebbins, 1998; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002/2003). This additional aspect distinguishes volunteers from participants in other forms of serious leisure such as amateurism and hobbyist activities.

Despite these benefits or rewards, serious leisure participants, including career volunteers, also experience costs in the form of tensions (e.g., differences of

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<sup>1</sup> Other forms of volunteering including casual leisure volunteering which is relatively short lived pleasurable activity that requires little skill or training in order to be enjoyable, and project-based volunteering which is a one-off or infrequent creative undertaking that often requires much skill or knowledge but does not develop into serious leisure (Stebbins, 2004).

opinion), dislikes (e.g., bureaucracy), and disappointments (e.g., being denied an attractive reward) (Stebbins, 2005). The cost associated with intense time commitment invested by participants has also been noted in research on serious leisure activities (Baldwin & Norris, 1999). Interestingly, research indicates that these costs tend not to be significant enough to drive serious leisure participants away from volunteering (e.g., Baldwin & Norris, 1999; Stebbins, 1996, 2005; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002/2003). Research suggests that serious leisure can become the central organizing principle in people's lives, where "participants privilege their time and resources for their serious leisure and its social world" (Raisborough, 2007, p.687). However, while the theoretical connection has been discussed, there is little research examining the links between the numerous benefits and costs of serious leisure specifically associated with older adult volunteering.

### ***Older Adult Volunteering***

As older adults seek to structure meaningful lives in the absence of substantial work and family commitments, various forms of activity become increasingly important. Volunteering has been identified as one way in which older adults can hold meaningful social roles, gain new skills, and become part of a social network of other volunteers (Chambre, 1987; Price, 2007). Older adults (65 and older) contribute on average the most volunteer hours of any age group, yet they have the lowest rate of volunteering of any age group in Canada, and the second lowest rate of volunteering in the United States next to those under 25 years of age (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007; Hall, Lasby, Gumulka, & Tryon, 2006). Relatively fewer older adults are involved in volunteering in comparison to their younger counterparts; however, those who do give their time contribute more hours on average to voluntary organizations. This trend is also consistent outside of North America, as data from Australia and the UK illustrate similar patterns (Gill, 2006; Hill, 2006). As a result, strategic initiatives are being developed to encourage volunteering among older adults in these countries (Gill, 2006; Price, 2007).

Volunteering has long been recognized as a rewarding and beneficial activity for older adults, reflecting an active lifestyle during later life (Chambre, 1987). The act of volunteering has been of particular interest to social gerontologists because of the demonstrated positive impact on the physical, mental, and social well-being of older adults (e.g., Musick & Wilson, 2003; Onyx & Warbuton, 2003; Price, 2007; Warburton, 2006). Specifically, research on formal volunteering (i.e., within a club or organization) among older adults indicates that individuals accrue psychological benefits such as increased confidence and self-esteem, lower depression levels, and a more defined sense of purpose in life (Li & Ferraro, 2005; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Mutchler, Burr, & Caro, 2003; Warburton, 2006). Formal volunteering also benefits the individual as it provides increased social interaction to counter isolation and loneliness, as well as improved functional health and longevity (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Warburton, 2006). These benefits further impact one's ability for social integration (Onyx & Warburton, 2003). Rochester and Hutchison (2002) also provided insight into self-reported benefits, and reasons why older people stay involved in volunteer experiences. These included keeping busy and active,

making a valuable contribution to an organization, developing existing interests and skills, learning new skills, and social interaction. Narushima's (2005) findings also showed that older adult volunteers in community nonprofit organizations found continued learning and mental stimulation through challenges posed by their volunteer role to be highly rewarding.

While these studies provide insight into the benefits and rewards of the volunteer experience for older adults, examining the negative aspects or costs of volunteering has received relatively less attention (Warbuton et al., 2001). Some research has considered the barriers to volunteering in terms of perceptions and attitudes, cultural barriers, practical barriers, health status, and organizational policies and practices (e.g., Gill, 2006; Lasby, 2004; Li & Ferraro, 2005; Rochester & Hutchison, 2002). Narushima (2005) found that older adults cited the loss of the grassroots spirit of community volunteering and lack of opportunity for input into programs as negatively impacting their volunteer experience. Yet, despite these criticisms, older adults in their study viewed their own complaints as "fruit of their learning" (Narushima, 2005, p. 578) and reflected on the new perspectives they had gained through the experience and how their complaints could be constructive.

### ***Older Adult Leisure***

Leisure behaviour among older adults is a growing area of investigation and three main areas of focus have been developed. First, research has examined the role of leisure in successful adaptation to retirement and its contribution to increased life satisfaction (e.g., Gibson, et al., 2003/2004; Iwasaki & Smale, 1998; Janke, Davey, & Kleiber, 2006; Nimrod, 2007a, b; Stanley & Freysinger, 1995). Second, studies have examined particular areas of leisure engagement and the associated benefits of participation. For example, participation in various forms of physical activity such as dance, masters sports, and recreational activities has been identified as one general area of leisure engagement, contributing to decreased stress, meaningful experiences of community, and improved physical and mental health among older adults (e.g., Cooper & Thomas, 2002; Lyons & Dionigi, 2007; Sasidharan, Payne, Orsega-Smith, & Godbey, 2006). Informal leisure activities such as socializing and visiting friends have been linked with psychological benefits (Iwasaki & Smale, 1998) and reduced functional decline in older adults (Avlund et al., 2004; Menec, 2003). Engagement in formal leisure activities such as participation in clubs and organizations has also been shown to be positively associated with psychological well-being (Menec, 2003), decreased depression (Musick & Wilson, 2003), and increased physical functioning and health status (Avlund et al.; Menec).

A third focus of the research on older adult leisure has been the identification of particular characteristics of the leisure experience that contribute to "successful" and satisfying aging (Guinn, 1999; Nimrod, 2007a). Guinn noted that the *quality* of leisure activity participation is an important factor for life satisfaction in retirement. Gibson et al., (2003/2004) also claimed that leisure must be meaningful in order to contribute to the quality of life for older adults. Various aspects of the leisure experience that are particularly meaningful to older adults have been identified. A few studies revealed that older adults are aware of their

internal needs and want to choose their leisure activities based on those needs (Craike & Coleman, 2005; Gibson et al., 2003/2004; Robertson, 2005). Other studies indicated that older adults desire leisure activities that provide a challenge or an opportunity to learn new skills and that these experiences are associated with a higher degree of life satisfaction (Guinn, 1999; Nimrod, 2007b). Leisure experiences that facilitate social interaction have also been shown to be empowering and meaningful, particularly for retired women (Gibson et al., 2003/2004; Iwasaki & Smale, 1998; Son, Kerstetter, Yarnal, & Baker, 2007). According to Lyons and Dionigi (2007), traditional sites for experiencing community among older adults, such as churches, neighborhoods, and schools are now being replaced by contexts such as leisure, where feelings of community can be created to counter isolation and loneliness during older adulthood. However, Guinn found that social leisure can also be stress-inducing for older adults, particularly if it undermines one's sense of freedom. Research has identified several constraints and negative influences that can impinge on the realization of fulfilling leisure in later life. These include institutional constraints such as cutbacks to leisure services (Losier, Bourque, & Vallerand, 1993; Pedlar, Dupuis, & Gilbert, 1996), discrepancies between societal and individual role expectations (Pedlar et al., 1996), and amount of support received from family and friends for leisure activities (Sasidharan et al., 2006). Losier et al. further noted that perceptions of leisure constraints among the elderly undermined leisure motivation, ultimately impacting satisfaction and further participation.

### Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to understand older adults' experiences with volunteering in the context of community sport. The secondary purpose was to uncover suggestions for how their volunteer experience could be enhanced. While research continues to examine volunteering as serious leisure, older adult volunteering, and older adult leisure, this paper connects and builds on these bodies of literature to better understand the volunteer experience for older adults and its potential to enrich the quality of life for this growing demographic.

Community sport organizations (CSOs) are the context for volunteering in this study for two reasons. First, sport and recreation organizations are the most prevalent type of nonprofit and voluntary organization in Canada, representing 21% of this sector (Gumulka, Barr, Lasby, & Brownlee, 2005). Further, 71% of sport and recreation organizations operate at the community level (Hall et al., 2004). The magnitude and impact of CSOs in many Western countries is vast and they are a substantial fixture in many communities (cf. Doherty & Misener, 2008). Second, as membership-based, non-profit organizations, CSOs rely extensively on volunteers and therefore may be an excellent context for older adults to pursue volunteering as a leisure activity.

Cuskelly et al.'s (2002/2003) research with career volunteers in the community sport setting confirmed the relationship between serious leisure and volunteer work. While not specific to older adults, their findings support using a serious leisure framework for understanding the nature of volunteers' experiences in formal organizations such as those found in sport. The current study extends this knowl-

edge base to the specific demographic of older adults as patterns and preferences related to their involvement in volunteering have been shown to differ from other age groups (e.g., Lasby, 2004; Rochester & Hutchison, 2002).

## Method

### *Sample*

Open-ended, audio-recorded interviews were conducted with twenty older adults (65 years and older) who were volunteering with one or more community sport organizations at the time of the study. CSOs in one community were contacted by the researchers and asked to identify any older adult volunteers within their club who would be willing to participate. Names and contact information were provided by the organizations. Identified individuals were then contacted by the investigators and their status as older adults and continuous sport volunteers was confirmed. A minimum period of time in a volunteer role was not used as a sampling criteria; however, the study was delimited to participants who were regular (i.e., continual) volunteers, thus providing a benchmark for classifying these volunteers as serious leisure participants in further analysis (cf. Stebbins, 2005). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were then arranged with those individuals who consented to participate ( $n = 7$ ). A snowball sampling technique was also used (Patton, 2002) where participants were asked to identify any sport volunteers they knew who met the age and volunteering conditions of this study, and would be willing to be contacted about participating. The investigators contacted these additional individuals directly ( $n = 13$ ) and invited them to be interviewed. All consented to participate and interviews were arranged. Participants were recruited until it was determined that the interview data were saturated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### *Participant Profile*

The sample included 5 women and 15 men with a combined average age of 72 years. The large majority of participants were married ( $n = 15$ ) and half the sample ( $n = 10$ ) had completed university or college. Interestingly, approximately one-third ( $n = 7$ ) had been school teachers as their primary occupation prior to retirement. In terms of their current volunteering, most of the older adults ( $n = 14$ ) volunteered in leadership roles (e.g., president, chair, board member, convenor), three were coaches, two were members of subcommittees of their organization, and one was an official. They volunteered in a variety of sports such as minor hockey, curling, baseball, and figure skating. The median hours contributed to the participants' primary sport organization was 6.5 per week. The average of 9.6 hours was skewed by one individual who was involved 30 hours per week, thus the median value is of greater interest. The median years the participants had been with their organization was 14.5, with 10 years in their current role. Again, the average values of 17.5 years in the organization and 12.4 years in the current role were skewed by another individual who had been with her organization 58 years,

and 30 years in her current role. The extensive time that the volunteers had been with their sport organization provided further indication that this activity is a form of serious leisure for these older adults (Stebbins, 1982, 2001, 2005).

### *Data Collection*

In order to tap into the experiences of the older adult volunteers, participants were asked to focus on their primary sport organization and describe their sport volunteer experience with that organization. Specifically, participants were asked the following open-ended questions: (1) whether and how they felt they made a contribution or difference to the organization, (2) what have been positive and negative aspects of their involvement (including describing situations where they felt these aspects), (3) why they stay involved, and (4) whether they have ever thought about leaving. Participants were also asked about what they felt their organization could do to enhance their experience as a volunteer. Two pilot interviews were conducted with older adult sport volunteers and subsequent minor clarifications were made to the interview guide following these interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

Following Patton (2002), the audio-recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using inductive methods, including open coding within the broad interview topics and the identification of emergent themes grounded within those topics. This form of qualitative analysis allows for discovery rather than testing and verification of a phenomenon, enabling investigators to gain insights that are not necessarily guided by a given perspective at the outset (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The lead investigator coded the data, and then all codes and coded data were reviewed independently by the other two investigators. Round-table discussions were held where the researchers shared independent insights on the content of each theme and discussed any divergent perspectives until consensus was reached. The final themes are presented within the findings section, and subsequently discussed with respect to the literature on serious leisure, older adult volunteering, and older adult leisure.

The use of qualitative methods for research on leisure and later life, and in particular the use of open-ended interviews, has been advocated by Gibson (2006) as a method that contributes to an in-depth understanding of leisure through individuals' perceptions of their own experience. The ontological assumption underpinning this study is that meanings exist through the ways individuals experience situations in which the phenomenon of leisure is present and these meanings are understood in relation to their personal circumstances and social-cultural contexts (cf. Watkins & Bond, 2007). While the current study seeks to identify common patterns, this assumption also recognizes and gives attention to individual experiences that may differ from a group experience and are thus notable for their unique perspective (cf. Baldwin & Norris, 1999). **In the presentation of findings**, selected quotations are included that represent the data within each theme and pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the participants.



## Findings

The themes were ultimately collapsed into three categories: (1) positive volunteering experiences, (2) negative volunteering experiences, and (3) enhancing the volunteer experience. When asked whether, and how, they felt they made a contribution or difference to their organization, participants felt strongly that they had indeed made a contribution and cited many rewarding or beneficial aspects of volunteering. Further, as might be expected, the themes that emerged when participants were asked about why they stay involved also closely paralleled those uncovered when participants described the positive aspects of their involvement (cf. Losier et al., 1993; Rochester & Hutchison, 2002). As a result, these themes were combined within a broader category of positive volunteering experiences. Similarly, when asked whether they had ever thought about leaving, themes emerged that were closely related to those revealed when participants described negative aspects of their experience. These were combined into a broader category of negative volunteering experiences.

### *Positive Volunteering Experiences*

Overall, participants spoke very proudly and excitedly about their volunteer experiences. Several distinct aspects were particularly positive, including: (1) making a contribution, (2) active living, and (3) social aspects.

*Making a contribution.* Through describing specific situations where they felt their volunteer experience was particularly positive, it was evident that almost all participants ( $n = 19$ ) believed that they were making a contribution or difference to their sport organization. The most frequent means of doing so was through their own skills and knowledge, which were discussed by 17 participants. Of those who discussed their skills, many also noted that previous experience in their specific occupation prior to retirement fostered the development of those skills (e.g., organization, coaching, and leadership). For example, Margaret noted, "I have brought in the policies because I have dealt with them in the schools and it is relatively easy for me." Jerry also commented, "I think I make a difference. I have confidence in what I do. I am easy going and can deal with different personalities. I think I have the organizational skills, too, to draw up schedules and teams and just keep everything functioning."

There were several other ways in which participants felt that they make a contribution to the organization. One way was through their attitudes and beliefs, which was mentioned by nine participants. For example, perseverance, positivity, hard work, enthusiasm, and a sense of humor were all noted as ways they felt they make a contribution. Half of the participants also felt that they make a contribution to their organization through filling a needed role and offering their time. The idea that "somebody has got to do it" was frequently discussed by these participants; however, the sentiment expressed by John was representative of many others: "I backed into it, but I don't regret it. I have put a lot of time in and was available to help out . . . you see things that have to be done and you do it." Lastly, taking initiative and bringing ideas to the organization was noted by three participants and thus represented a more unique means of making a contribution.

These participants discussed situations where programs or initiatives would not have happened if they had not taken the initiative or brought forward an idea and consequently, these individuals felt that they had made a positive contribution to their organizations.

In addition, many participants ( $n = 7$ ) discussed the benefits and joys associated with being part of sport and youth development in their communities. Notably, the positive experiences associated with their enjoyment of being involved in sport were frequently linked to the notion of youth development or working with kids. Donald highlighted his experience, saying:

If you ever see a kid that throws a rock and it goes right to the button and you see the smile on their face and they are jumping up and down. It is great to see the development, it is better than getting it myself. I like their enthusiasm, it makes me feel young. I like to think that I am helping to improve young kids and get them involved in sport.

A few participants ( $n = 4$ ) also discussed how being part of a legacy through giving back to their community was an important aspect of volunteering that gave them a sense of pride and fulfillment. John commented:

I am on the ground floor now, but I am not there making any decisions anymore. But we built the foundation. . . we have a very good [club] that is being run exceptionally well by exceptional people. It is nice to see that, and say I have accomplished this and I can pass it on now. There are other people who can pick up the ball and run with it.

Also, Anne noted that “[volunteering] keeps you feeling like you are giving something back to sport. It gave a lot to you and it is a chance to give back to it.” While this theme was not frequently mentioned, the tone of the comments provided by those who did discuss this theme was one of great satisfaction and it was evident that this aspect had tremendously enriched their experience.

*Active living.* A common theme among participants when asked to describe the positive aspects of their volunteer experience was how their involvement in volunteering allowed them to be active and accrue health benefits. Twelve participants discussed specific benefits of volunteering in this regard. For instance, they noted that the activity keeps them exercising, keeps their minds and bodies active, and prevents boredom. Notably, comments regarding this theme were particularly focused on age. Ruth said,

When you stop, you might as well lay down and die! (laugh) I think you’ve got to keep busy. It’s so important as a person gets older. It’s great that I’m still volunteering. I think otherwise, you’d start feeling sorry for yourself, sitting at home doing nothing.

Bruce also expressed that “personally, my health has improved so much because of sports and volunteering and being active. I don’t take any prescriptions.” These comments also emerged when participants were asked why they stay involved.

Two participants shared a relatively unique perspective where the opportunity to learn something new was mentioned when they were asked about their

positive volunteer experiences. They both noted that they were there to make a contribution to the organization, yet were pleased and surprised to have learned new skills and been exposed to new opportunities for learning in the meantime.

*Social aspects.* Over half of the participants ( $n = 11$ ) noted that the social contact and friendships gained through volunteering were extremely positive aspects of their involvement. Barbara illustrated how these relationships both impacted her volunteer experience and developed into personal relationships.

It's not just the commitment to the [organization], it's the commitment to each other. We've built up real trust and loyalty within the group, and we're there for each other in more ways than you can imagine. It obviously rubs off on what we're doing. . . . If somebody isn't able to do one of the sessions, then somebody else jumps straight in.

Many participants noted that the interaction with people that occurred as part of volunteering was particularly meaningful during retirement and "you haven't got a steady job and it is nice to be doing something with people and meeting people and finding out what is going on" (Marty). Further, the camaraderie and friendships that were formed during volunteering were noted to be a main reason for staying involved.

Another social aspect that emerged from the data was the recognition and awards that participants received. Just under half of the participants ( $n = 9$ ) mentioned receiving recognition, awards, and general appreciation for their volunteering efforts and that this recognition helped to make their experience more meaningful. Marty commented on what he had received: "Just thank yous, and that is nice . . . a lot of people recognize me and I think that is rewarding. The [club] that I work with, they have given me theatre tickets and little things like that to show their appreciation". While recognition did not seem to be frequent or expensive, the older adults were pleased and spoke very favorably about the experience when they were given some token of appreciation or verbal thanks. Margaret clearly articulated this idea:

The awards are not important really. Sometimes I think that people who do these things for awards, the money might be better spent some place else. It is a big enough boost for someone to say thank you; a lot of people do say thank you, thanks a lot for the season. That is rewarding.

Participants did not discuss receiving recognition and awards as a reason for staying involved. Rather, these were positive benefits of their participation that seemed to enhance their experience.

Organizational support was another positive social aspect of volunteering for older adults in the current study. One quarter of the older adults ( $n = 5$ ) noted experiences where they felt genuinely supported by the organization and how this positive dynamic influenced their volunteer experience. Whether it was for initiatives that the volunteer was developing, or for an event that the volunteer was coordinating, these individuals talked about the support they received from their club. This idea was evident through comments such as "I get a tremendous amount of support from the club" (Donald), "they are behind you" (Barbara), and

“just because you have bypass surgery, it doesn’t mean you are done, you can come back and volunteer and play like anyone else. That is what is so good about this organization” (Margaret). Indeed, comments related to this theme added meaning to their volunteer experiences, however, organizational support was not discussed as a reason for staying involved.

### *Negative Volunteering Experiences*

While positive volunteering experiences were much more prevalent, some negative aspects were discussed in terms of: (1) interpersonal relations, (2) organizational processes, (3) time and effort required, and (4) credentials and other requirements for volunteering. Additionally, a theme of “no negative experiences” emerged from the data. These themes are presented in greater detail.

*Interpersonal relations.* Half of the participants ( $n = 10$ ) discussed situations where negative interpersonal relations caused tension, anxiety or disappointment in their volunteer experience. This theme was the most negative aspect of volunteering, given the strong or intense comments and stories that emerged as well as the frequency of this theme compared to other negative aspects of their experiences. Generally, in these cases, they had endured personal criticism, or had clashing perspectives with another club member. For example, Jack explained:

Sometimes you get criticized for trying to help and that is the most frustrating part. You give your time and you get criticized. I can’t change and if you want me to change, I will have to resign. One of the pitfalls of volunteering is that you try and do something and someone is super critical of you. Now were they right or were you right? If they were right, then you better take a look at what you are doing, but if you were right, then it impacts you.

Doris also verbalized that “There is one gentleman that has ruined the atmosphere because of his overcompetitiveness. I am on the executive and he has made me question my need or want to be involved.” While participants had clearly experienced frustration associated with these dynamics, many did qualify their statements by saying that it was “nothing too serious” (Marty) and recognized that “you can’t please everybody all the time” (Bruce). Overall, many were able to forget about it and move on. However, these situations were also discussed by a few older adults as a reason that caused them to think about leaving: “when it gets to be too many complaints and if people start getting personal about it” (Paul).

*Organizational processes.* Organizational processes also emerged when participants described negative aspects of their volunteer experience. However, in comparison to interpersonal relations, comments associated with this theme were much less intrusive and thus noted to have less of an impact on their overall volunteer experience. This theme was noted by three older adults, and generally centered on the “politics” within an organization such as rules, policies, systems, and conflict associated with various hierarchies (e.g., working with a provincial sport organization to organize a competition or with the City to ensure adequate facility time).

*Time and effort required.* Three participants found the time commitment required for volunteering to be very extensive, yet the emotions expressed towards

this commitment varied. One participant, who had been involved in various volunteer roles within her organization over many years, shared her perspective which reflected her free choice to be involved to such a great extent:

It takes my time. . . and sometimes I think, 'Gosh, I wish I wasn't going there tonight.' I could go to something else tonight, but I never did. [When] I was on the board for thirteen years. . . I missed one meeting. To me, it's been total dedication (Marie).

The perspective that volunteering limited opportunities to participate in other activities was also expressed by Bill who noted that he had difficulty finding people to replace him when necessary, thus limiting his sense of freedom and making his volunteer role seem more like an obligation. Patsy even expressed: "I am getting close to starting to say, 'do I really need all of this time commitment?'" which reflected the influence that the extensive time commitment had on her willingness to remain involved.

Related to insufficient time was the perceived lack of other volunteers. Several of the older adults ( $n = 4$ ) discussed their frustrations with not having enough volunteers for certain roles, and to get the "work" done. Participants discussed the need for more volunteers who could replace them when they needed or wanted to be away, or as volunteers in other roles in the organization, which impacted the organization at large. Overall, they recognized that it is difficult to recruit new volunteers, yet they had strong desires to overcome this challenge and encourage others to "step up to the plate" (Helen).

*Requirements/credentials for volunteering.* Two older adults noted the requirements and/or credentials for volunteering as having a negative impact on their volunteer experience. These included police checks, first aid certifications, and coaching courses. These participants recognized the value of such formalized practices for their organizations, however, still noted that being required to adhere to these standards after many years of hands-on experience was frustrating, particularly when they were required to pay for the courses themselves.

*No negative experiences.* Notably, there were five participants who felt that they had not experienced any negative aspects of volunteering to speak of, and twelve participants who said that they had not thought about leaving their organization. The comments within this theme noted their choice to participate and the pure enjoyment they received from volunteering. Doris, who was involved in a sport organization where many older adults volunteered, provided a further unique insight:

The only negative aspect I would think is that because we are in an organization like this with so many seniors, we are going to lose some friends [who pass away]. Many more people than you would if you hadn't been involved in this type of organization. Other than that, no. The people are great. I can't think of anything negative.

### *Enhancing the Volunteer Experience*

When participants were asked about what they felt their organization could

do to enhance their experience as a volunteer, several suggestions were given. The most frequently noted improvements were related to organizational systems and processes ( $n = 9$ ), and recruiting more volunteers ( $n = 7$ ). Communication, policies, better coordination among various roles within the organization, and job sharing were discussed in terms of organizational systems and processes. For example, desired improvements were noted in terms of communication within the organization. John said,

It is all about opening the communication on the issues. It is difficult. Human nature is human nature and if someone does not feel they are doing anything wrong, then it is hard to stop that from an organizational point of view. . . opening the communications would be a good start though.

Communication with the larger community in order to increase the profile of the organization and increase participation was also discussed. Marie desired to see improvements in "communication and getting the information out to different groups in the community on how to compete and how to get involved." Policies and procedures were another area of concern related to organizational systems, where participants felt that changes could be made which would improve their own experience.

If you have a body in place for so long that they don't see other ways of doing things, they don't want to move on, progress, it gets frustrating. They need those rules where you can not be in a specific position for more than 10 years . . . these bodies or organizations need to be prepared to advance and change (Marcel).

Relatedly, recruiting more volunteers was another frequently suggested improvement from many older adults. Having more volunteers to lighten the load and improve programs within the organization was suggested by several older adults, including Paul, who commented "The load I've got is OK because I'm doing what I want to do. But with more people, we'd be able to do more things." Jim also said,

The organization could get off their rear ends and do something more concrete than leaving a handful of guys doing everything. I find, in all organizations that I have been involved in, these are some of the draw backs; not everyone is involved in the process.

Only one participant discussed how he would like the opportunity to learn new skills in his volunteer role.

Lastly, further to the notion that no negative experiences were encountered by several participants, when asked whether there was anything that their sport organization could do to improve their volunteer experience, several older adults ( $n = 5$ ) noted that they were satisfied and no improvements were needed. Lucy's comment was characteristic of these responses: "I have been doing it too long to worry about that, the young people coming up may want change, but if it is work-

ing, why change it?”. Similarly, Gwen said “It is hard enough for them without worrying about making me happy. It is a good experience for me either way.”

### Discussion

We now turn to a discussion of the experiences of older adult volunteers in sport as they relate to serious leisure, older adult volunteering, and older adult leisure. The sample was characterized by volunteers who contribute a substantial number of hours to their primary organization, which is consistent with the profile of older adult volunteers in general (e.g., Hall et al., 2006). Together with participants’ years of involvement, the findings suggest that these individuals are career volunteers engaged in serious leisure, according to their continuous substantial helping and significant personal effort (Stebbins, 2001).

Overall, participants discussed their volunteer roles as meaningful and satisfying experiences, and provided evidence of several specific benefits or rewards of volunteering. Making a contribution to their sport organization was a consistently rewarding aspect for the older adult volunteers in this study, followed by active living, and the social interaction and friendships they enjoyed from their involvement. To a lesser extent, support from the organization and recognition for their efforts enhanced the older adults’ experience, as did the opportunity to be associated with sport and youth development, and being part of a legacy through giving back to the larger community. These findings can be compared with the literature on older adult leisure in general, which indicates that this demographic prefers experiences that provide challenge, opportunity to learn new skills, freedom of choice and social interaction (Craike & Coleman, 2005; Gibson et al., 2003/2004; Guinn, 1999; Iwasaki & Smale, 1998; Nimrod, 2007b; Robertson, 2005). While social interaction was a particularly positive aspect of the older adults’ volunteering, very few participants discussed the opportunity to learn new skills or seek a challenge in their leisure as a valued part of their experience. Rather, they focused on how the skills they had gained throughout their lives could be used to make a contribution to the organization. This finding highlights the distinction between self-interest (i.e., helping oneself) and altruistic (i.e., helping others) aspects of serious leisure. The former is a valued aspect of all serious leisure pursuits (Stebbins, 1998), however, career volunteering is uniquely characterized by altruism as well, which differentiates this form of serious leisure from hobbyist and amateur activities (Orr, 2006; Stebbins, 1982, 1998). While many of the benefits of volunteering as leisure reported here could be considered self-interest in the form of personal or social rewards (e.g., health, social interaction), the most frequently reported rewards from the older adults’ volunteer experience was giving back, filling a needed role, or taking the initiative to bring ideas forward, for the good of the organization. The study also revealed that participants focused particularly on improvements to the organization, rather than personal rewards, when discussing ways their volunteer experience could be enhanced. The relatively greater focus on altruistic experiences underscores the meaning of volunteering as a serious leisure activity for the older adults in this study. This finding also adds to our understanding of older adult volunteers in general, where the literature has tended to focus on personal rewards.

Research on the benefits of older adult volunteering indicates that volunteering provides a positive impact on physical and mental health and as well as social well-being (Chambre, 1987; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Onyx & Warbuton, 2003; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Warburton, 2006). The current study shows that the sport volunteer experience did indeed provide opportunity for older adults to accrue health benefits through active living as well as social contact and friendships, and these were particularly rewarding aspects of their involvement. Research also indicates that older adults gain a more defined sense of purpose in life from volunteering (Warburton); a finding that was supported in the current study as the participants described the benefits of being associated with sport and youth development, as well as being part of a legacy for the larger community through their involvement. This particular finding is also consistent with Orr's (2006) contention that "serious leisure provides people with the opportunity to learn and participate in the social world associated with their chosen field of interest" (p. 201), and it reflects the serious leisure characteristics of strong identification with the chosen pursuit and unique ethos (Stebbins, 2001). As with Baldwin and Norris' (1999) observation that showdog handlers had a strong personal identification with the social world associated with being a "dog person," several of the older adult volunteers in the current study appeared to have a strong identification with community youth sport. As significant cornerstones of our communities, community sport organizations provide avenues for various forms of participation throughout one's lifespan (Cuskelly, 2004). The findings of the current study suggest that taking part in a continuous substantial role where one is able to be part of and/or give back to such organizations during later life can be a positive leisure volunteer experience for older adults.

However, most of the participants in this study also experienced challenges or costs in the form of tensions, dislikes and disappointments. Stebbins (1998) claimed that, "as with other serious leisure, career volunteers occasionally need to persevere. People who want to continue experiencing the same satisfaction in an activity have to meet certain challenges from time to time" (p. 71).

Research in several contexts has revealed a number of negative aspects of volunteering including lack of volunteers to do the work, changes in management and bureaucracy, feeling tied down by the volunteer role, and differences of opinion (Cuskelly et al., 2002/2003; Narushima, 2005; Stebbins, 2005). Nonetheless, these constraints often have a positive perspective. For example, Stebbins (1998) noted that perseverance can help leisure participants achieve their goals and express themselves. Similarly, Narushima found that older adult volunteers appreciated the challenges posed by their volunteer roles and believed that the stimulation kept them mentally active. While many older adults in the current study felt that they were able to 'move on' from the negative experiences they faced, there was little evidence that these challenges fostered goal achievement or personal development as Stebbins (1998) and Narushima have suggested. Rather, the negative experiences associated with interpersonal relations in the current study were often reported to be intensely personal in nature and caused participants to question their involvement and think about leaving the organization. While not specific to older adults, Messner (2009) highlighted the importance



of a more critical perspective for understanding the potential negative aspects of the sport volunteer experience and the impact that these aspects can have on individuals. The in-depth perspective taken in the current study revealed that the dominant challenge was related to negative relations between people, where older adults endured personal criticism, or had clashing perspectives with another club member. Messner (2009, p. 52) also found that female volunteer coaches described their volunteer experiences as being “shaped and constrained by the context ..., mostly through subtle interpersonal dynamics rather than through overt discrimination” (e.g., covert exclusionary practices, attempts by the majority to challenge the minority volunteers). This is in contrast to Narushima’s study on organizational volunteering among older adults which found that problem-solving challenges eventually fostered a sense of accomplishment (e.g., working together to solve problems related to the sustainability of the organization). Given the nature of community sport volunteering, which is characterized by close and extensive interaction (Doherty & Misener, 2008), challenges with interpersonal dynamics may be particularly heightened in this context. Further, such challenges may be specific to under-represented groups in the sport volunteer context (e.g., women, older adults; Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Doherty, 2005). This warrants further critical examination (cf. Messner, 2009). In general, interpersonal relations is a potentially disruptive aspect of volunteering that does not appear to have garnered much attention in the older adult leisure or older adult volunteering literature, and warrants further investigation.

Freedom of choice has also been identified as an important feature of leisure activities among older adults (Craike & Coleman, 2005; Robertson, 2005), and was highlighted by Guinn (1999) as a potential constraint on fulfilling leisure in later life. This point was raised by a few participants in the current study, who indicated a desire to structure their own commitments yet felt somewhat constrained by the time and effort required for their volunteering role, noting this as a particularly negative aspect of their involvement. Notably, Lasby (2004) found that older adults were the least likely of all age groups to report lack of time as a barrier to volunteering. However, even though they may have more free time from other responsibilities, evidence suggests that older adults do not want to feel tied down by volunteering, or any other leisure activities, and potentially forfeit opportunities to participate elsewhere (e.g., Nagchoudhuri et al., 2005; Warburton et al., 2001). Part of this freedom and flexibility, as reported by the older adults in the current study, came from assurances that there were enough other volunteers to replace them if personal circumstances arise (cf. Hill, 2006). Lack of volunteers was, however, noted by a few of the study participants as a particularly negative aspect of their experience.

Nonetheless, research has shown that the costs typically associated with career volunteering are not significant enough to outweigh the rewards or benefits and ultimately drive these serious leisure participants away (Cuskelly et al., 2002/2003; Stebbins, 1996, 1998, 2005; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002/2003). This appears to be the case with the older adult volunteers in the current study who expressed some disappointments and tensions, but frequently admitted that the costs they experienced were hardly sufficient to drive them from this highly rewarding activity.

Rather, their meaningful and satisfying experiences enabled them to regard their volunteer roles as highly fulfilling. Baldwin and Norris (1999) argued that many serious leisure participants do not consciously weigh the costs against the benefits because of their close personal identification with the leisure pursuit. In their study, participants strongly identified with the act of volunteering and “believed that the endeavor represented ‘who they are’” (Baldwin & Norris, 1999, p.13). When asked to talk about their experiences, the older adults in the current study reported only a limited number of negative experiences, and very few reasons for thinking about leaving, suggesting that the benefits of volunteering override any costs that they incur as a result of engaging in this leisure activity. It has been suggested that a profound lifestyle awaits anyone who is continually and substantially involved in a serious leisure career (Stebbins, 2001). Further, this lifestyle may directly or indirectly benefit the wider community despite the costs, tensions, and conflicts that may be experienced (Gould et al., 2008). The findings here suggest that older adult volunteering in sport can be such a leisure lifestyle.

Overall, the findings provide evidence of key aspects of serious leisure volunteering for the sample of older adult volunteers in this study and help connect it with the literature on both older adult leisure and older adult volunteering. The sport volunteer experience did indeed provide an opportunity for older adults to enjoy both personal and social rewards in terms of active living, health benefits, and social contact through this leisure activity. The experience also encouraged a more defined sense of purpose as the older adults felt they were able to make a meaningful contribution to sport and youth development and be part of a legacy in their community. These benefits have been noted in the literature on older adult volunteering and older adult leisure, and they also reflect the serious leisure characteristics of durable benefits from participation, strong identification with the chosen pursuit, and a unique ethos associated with the activity (Stebbins, 2001). Evidence of other serious leisure characteristics among the older adult volunteers in the current context included substantial involvement and personal effort, and the need to persevere. The interpretation of the findings from several different perspectives provides rich insight into the older adult volunteer experience.

### Implications

Orr (2006) suggested in a study on museum volunteers that organizations may need to rethink their approach to volunteer management to one which promotes lifelong engagement through serious leisure, rather than a traditional economic conception of volunteers as an ‘input’ or cost-saving asset. This latter perspective is particularly prevalent in sport organizations as they generally struggle to recruit and retain volunteers (Cuskelly, Taylor, Hoyer, & Darcy, 2006). The desire to understand volunteer satisfaction and commitment is typically driven by this need (e.g., Cuskelly, 2004; Gratton, Nichols, Shibli, & Taylor, 1997). Together, Orr’s perspective and the findings of the current study suggest that older adult volunteers are participating in self-generated leisure consumption, gaining access to the social world of sport, in order to experience the benefits of serious leisure. This perspective could negate the utilitarian, cost-saving approach typically used by sport organizations when recruiting volunteers (e.g., Cuskelly et al., 2006). Sport

organizations need to be aware that older adults know what they want in their leisure, and in serious leisure volunteering in particular, and have specific desires that will make their experience more meaningful, thus encouraging continued involvement. Recognizing this, organizations should strive to go beyond managing volunteers and seek to put effort into meeting these expectations. This recommendation is not to suggest that sport organizations should alter their mandate as sport service providers in their communities, but rather that they might think more broadly about how they can most effectively support those who are contributing to the ongoing operation of the organization as well.

The findings of this study suggest that volunteering is a fulfilling leisure activity for older adults, and organizations can design and enhance leisure experiences that are meaningful and contribute to life satisfaction for older adults. For example, community sport organizations should ensure that this group of volunteers feels they are making a contribution and accruing the health and social benefits of volunteering. Organizations should also seek to improve their communication systems, promote teamwork and positive interactions, and recruit more volunteers to share the load. It is also important that older adult volunteers feel they have control over their involvement in this leisure activity. Flexibility and accommodation for role performance must be offered by the organization in order to facilitate satisfaction and sustained volunteerism among older adults (Nagchoudhuri et al., 2005).

Interestingly, there were fewer examples of costs than rewards revealed in this study; however, perhaps it is difficult to find examples of costs because those who have encountered particularly negative experiences may have already left the organization. By learning from the experiences of older adult volunteers who noted several aspects that would cause them to think about leaving the organization, we can address those concerns in order to keep older adults involved and perhaps encourage others to volunteer as well.

The ageing of the population also means that it may be prudent for governments to acknowledge the contribution that older people already make to the community, including through volunteering (cf. Gill, 2006). Highlighting different opportunities for volunteering in various contexts, such as sport can help governments to promote this leisure activity to a growing demographic, thereby expanding the potential for positive volunteer experiences and increased life satisfaction for older adults.

### **Future Research and Conclusions**

By detailing the experiences of older adult volunteers in sport and interpreting these experiences with respect to serious leisure, older adult volunteering, and older adult leisure, this paper adds to the empirical research in these areas and highlights connections among them. The findings illustrate that approaching volunteering among older adults through a serious leisure lens is appropriate and perhaps more insightful than an occupational perspective, as aspects of this experience were shown to be closely aligned with the characteristics of serious leisure.

To build on these exploratory findings, future research should explore the experiences of older adult volunteers in other settings (e.g., health care, the arts,

social services), from a serious leisure perspective. Future investigations could also measure the extent to which the various characteristics of serious leisure (e.g., need to persevere, strong identification with pursuit, unique ethos; cf. Gould et al., 2008) are experienced by older adults. Diverse approaches that investigate leisure and later life from several angles could also be undertaken. For example, as Gibson (2006) has boldly suggested, an intervention-based research program, whereby the effectiveness of leisure interventions (e.g., participation in career volunteer activities) is measured in pre-post test designs could be used to determine any change in levels of satisfaction, rewards/benefits, and costs for older adults. This research could provide useful information for voluntary organizations that would enable them to promote and enhance the experience of older adult volunteering. Further, as Baldwin and Norris (1999) pointed out, it is important to understand how serious leisure participants set limits on their time and other investments. Thus, future research could also explore whether the characteristics of serious leisure change depending on the level of intensity and involvement in volunteering, thereby attempting to uncover whether there is a point at which costs outweigh benefits in this type of leisure among older adults. Future research needs to also consider the influence of health, income, companionship, and transportation on the experience of older adults engaged or wishing to engage in volunteering as their leisure activity (cf. Janke et al., 2006; Stebbins, 2000).

The current study contributes to a better understanding of the nature of the older adult volunteer experience in general, and in sport in particular. Using the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of volunteering as serious leisure, older adult volunteering, and older adult leisure, this study revealed a range of rewards, costs, and desired improvements that older adult volunteers, as serious leisure participants, experienced. It may be concluded that the benefits they received, in relation to the small number of costs, made their leisure experience satisfying and contributed meaning to their stage of life.

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