Parent Identity and Volunteering in Youth Sport

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Youth sport relies on parents to volunteer for positions at all levels of the organization. Among these volunteer positions, that of coach is often responsible for the creation and delivery of most services in youth sport. The current scope of youth sport would be unattainable without parents’ continuous support; therefore, recruitment and retention of these parent-volunteer-coaches is a critical task for youth sport organizations. Parents, however, do not respond to volunteer service as would be predicted from current volunteer literature (Kim, Chelladurai, & Trail, 2007). Perhaps this disconnect is due to their identities as parents. The presence of their children in a youth sport setting has always been assumed to be a primary motivator for parents to volunteer as youth sport coaches.

Identity is often thought of as an internally held construct that is expressed across multiple situations by the individual. Identity theory (Stryker, 1968, 2000) conceptualizes an individual’s self concepts as made up of several identities formed through internalizing social roles taken on throughout life. Each identity exists within a hierarchy based on the likelihood that a given identity will be expressed in a situation. The prominence of an identity within the hierarchy is influenced by the commitment of the individual to relationships based on enacting the role which served as the basis of that identity.

This research used narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2002), identity theory (Stryker, 1968, 2000) and inductive coding to interpret the experiences of parent-volunteer-coaches in the youth sport setting. Parent volunteer coaches from a community soccer program participated in semi-structured interviews designed to elicit the parent’s experience as a volunteer. Questions and prompts sought to flesh out the respondent's story through perceived connections among important events both during and prior to volunteer coaching.

The inductive coding analysis yielded two groups of role types enacted within the youth sport setting: aspirational role types (involved parent, provider parent, protective parent, and humanistic coach) and avoided role types (hyper-competitive adult, biased adult, critical adult, and incompetent coach). Aspirational roles acted as goals for the behavior of parents during volunteer coaching. Each served as a standard that parents could emulate. Avoided roles were labels which parents strove not to acquire. Although enacting these roles were part of many narratives, the parents performed these roles sparingly and in full recognition of their inappropriateness in the youth sport environment.

The narrative analysis yielded seventeen parent stories by identifying the central plot that connected important events to role choices (Polkinghorne, 1995; Ricoeur, 1984; Riessman, 2002). One group of stories, entitled System, contained similar plots that focused on tension created through interaction with the structure of the youth sport organization. These stories did not feature change in role choice but resolution of tension via continued enactment of the originally chosen role. Four other groups of stories--History, Prior Arrangements, Crucible, and Right Role--focused on tension created through interaction primarily with his or her child. The dynamic nature of children growing and extending into sport participation modified longstanding relationship roles for the parents. Their identities as parents, coaches and participants served to both facilitate and complicate changes in relationship roles. Seeking a satisfactory relationship with their child in the sport context required change for many of the respondents. Ultimately, the role choices made in response to tension in each plot led to choosing or maintaining the volunteer-coach role and achieving a satisfactory relationship with his or her child.

These results suggest that the experience of youth sport volunteer coaching is not primarily based on a relationship with the organization. These volunteer stories rarely included the organization as the most important influence on their experience; instead, parent volunteer experiences were driven by identities that led to role choices within the parent-child relationship. Role choices were not static throughout the volunteer experience; several parents continued to shift the roles played in response to changes in perceptions of the context. These changes were both in contrast to identity driven choices and in compliance with them. Youth sport organizations that recognize the impact...
of the parent-child relationship can design volunteer recruitment and retention programs leading to greater satisfaction for parents while at the same time fulfilling the organizational need for dedicated volunteers.