Exploring the Initial Motivations of Individuals to Volunteer with a Sport-for-Homeless Initiative

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The success of many organizations depends greatly on the work and efforts of volunteers (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Wilson, 2000). As well, it has been estimated that between 18 and 27 percent of all volunteers worldwide are working with sport organizations (Cuskelly, 2008). While most research on volunteer motivation in sport has focused on large-scale events and professional venues (Bang & Chelladurai, 2003; Bang, Alexandris, & Ross, 2009; Farrell, Johnston, & Twynam, 1998; Williams, Dossa, & Tompkins, 1995), it is just as important to understand the initial motivations of volunteers with smaller, non-profit, sport-for-development (SFD) initiatives. These organizations use sport as a way to give back to the community they serve to make a positive difference in society. However, there is a paucity of research investigating the initial motivations of volunteers to affiliate with SFD initiatives working with marginalized populations such as the homeless. Therefore, the purpose of this study, and our central research question, was to investigate the initial motivations of volunteers who donated their time to work with a sport-for-homeless initiative called Street Soccer USA (SSUSA). SSUSA is a non-profit organization with a mission to use soccer as a means to help homeless individuals make positive changes in their lives. SSUSA operates in 20 U.S. cities and forms partnerships with local social service providers which take the lead in designing programming suitable for the clients they aim to serve. With only four full-time staff, the remainder of administrative and coaching duties within SSUSA is fulfilled by volunteers.

To inform our investigation, we adopted the functional approach to volunteer motivation (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992; Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996), which has been used by numerous scholars to study motivations of volunteers across various industry sectors (Gage & Thapa, 2011; Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 1998; Phillips & Phillips, 2010). This approach suggests that volunteers engage in similar volunteer activity to satisfy different, and sometimes multiple, motives. These six motivational functions to volunteer include: (a) values – the desire to volunteer based on ethics or morals; (b) understanding – using volunteer opportunities to acquire knowledge or gain skills; (c) enhancement – developing or being able to experience personal growth through volunteering; (d) career – gaining experience that can lead towards job attainment or advancement; (e) social – building relationships and meeting people through volunteering; and (f) protective – using volunteering to diminish negative emotions such as guilt (Clary & Snyder, 1991).

As well, this investigation was informed by previous volunteer motivation studies conducted in the sport context that have identified Love of Sport as another reason that individuals volunteer for sport-related organizations (Bang & Chelladurai, 2003; Bang & Ross, 2009; Cuskelly, 2004; Fairley, Kellet, & Green, 2007; Frey & Eitzen, 1991; MacLean & Hamm, 2007; Shank & Beasley, 1998). Essentially, these studies conclude that a motivator for individuals to volunteer their time with sporting organizations is their Love of Sport and desire to affiliate with a particular sport organization and be part of a sport community. Frey and Eitzen (1991) suggest that Love of Sport creates a desire for intrinsic motivation and not extrinsic rewards. They explain that amateur sport volunteering is driven by intrinsic motivation of past participation in the sport, which could include sport-for-homeless initiatives that people willingly volunteer their free time with in an effort to remain involved in their desired sport in some capacity.

For this exploratory study, qualitative methodology was employed. Specifically, we conducted focus groups with 36 SSUSA volunteer coaches and assistant coaches who were working with teams in five different cities. We selected focus groups as our data collection method, as it has been suggested that this method is appropriate when investigating topics that may not be fully developed in the literature (Morgan, 1997), such as volunteer motivations for a sport-for-homeless program. Teams from five cities were selected that represented the diversity of the SSUSA program in terms of longevity and geographical location in an effort to encompass a wide range of volunteers and account for different experiences that each location might provide. Each focus group consisted of five to eight
participants, a range recommended by Neuman (2003). Focus groups were conducted by the first author after participant consent and lasted approximately 75 to 90 minutes. The focus group interview guides were semi-structured and based upon the tenets of the functionalist approach to volunteer motivation (Clary & Snyder, 1991; Clary et al., 1996) and the sport volunteer motivation literature (Bang & Chelladurai, 2003; Bang et al., 2004). The data analysis process consisted of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To enhance the dependability and credibility of the research, triangulation of investigators was employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings revealed that the SSUSA volunteers were initially motivated by three of the six factors of the functionalist approach to volunteer motivation (Clary & Snyder, 1991; Clary et al., 1998) – values, enhancement, and social – along with the additional variable of Love of Sport (Bang & Chelladurai, 2003; Bang et al., 2009; Fairley et al., 2007; MacLean & Hamm, 2007). This research suggests that the appeal to initially volunteer for a sport-for-homeless initiative derived from the desire and need to combine philanthropic interests (values) with one's passion for sport (Love of Sport), coupled with social and personal enhancement aspects.

While previous research has been conducted in various sport contexts on volunteer motivation (Bang & Chelladurai, 2003; Bang & Ross, 2009; Fairley et al., 2007; MacLean & Hamm, 2007), this paper makes a unique contribution to the extant literature as the first study to investigate volunteer motivations in a sport-for-homeless context. We discovered volunteers for SSUSA had multiple reasons for donating their time, although not all of the functionalist motivations emerged in this study. The research context as well as characteristics of volunteers may explain why some of the functionalist motivations did not emerge. Theoretically, these findings imply that Love of Sport and the functional approach are suitable frameworks to evaluate initial volunteer motivation in the sport-for-homelessness context. These findings have practical use for SFD programs in recruiting volunteers, and as well, suggest a number of crucial areas to explore with future research, which will be discussed during the presentation.