Sport Event Volunteers and Impact on Sense of Community

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Introduction

The survival of many sport organizations is heavily dependent upon volunteers (Costa, Chalip, Green, & Simes, 2006; Doherty & Carron, 2003; Green & Chalip, 2004). While it is clear that volunteers are essential to the overall operational success of many sport events, recruiting and retaining volunteers remains a challenge (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Stevens, 2008). Thus, an enhanced understanding of the nature and outcomes associated with volunteering will better enable sport managers to stage successful events.

A growing body of research contends that volunteering, in general, is often considered a serious leisure activity (Laverie & McDonald, 2007; Stebbins, 1982; Williams, Dossa, & Tompkins, 1995). In particular, Green and Chalip’s (2004) work on Olympic volunteerism supports the idea that volunteering, especially in sport settings, should be understood as a leisure choice. Thus, sport event volunteers are described as serious leisure participants in that they have a defined social world with identified social contacts and focused collective activity (Hoye et al., 2009; Stebbins, 1996). Further, within this ‘serious leisure’ perspective, social motives play a large role in the volunteer experience. A common motivational factor for sport event volunteers is to help their sport or community (Coyne & Coyne, 2001; Farrell et al., 1998; Hamm & MacLean, 2009), however, Green and Chalip (1998, 2004) note that such altruism may only be prompted when other social motives are present. Specifically, the opportunity to socialize and interact with other volunteers who share a common interest was found to be the primary motive for ski event volunteers (Williams et al., 1995), and meeting new friends was a strong motive for volunteers at the 1994 Winter Olympic Games (Elstad, 1996). These results support the importance of expressive volunteer experience components (Warner, Newland, & Green, 2011) and relate closely to Green and Chalip’s (2004) suggestion that sense of community is inherent in sport volunteerism (see also Green & Chalip, 1998).

Overall, this commentary raises two important areas of inquiry: (1) there is a need to further explore the sense of community concept within a sport event context, and (2) such an examination should extend to small-scale sport events in order to augment existing research on volunteerism within large-scale sport events. The purpose of this study was to examine whether the volunteer experience at a small-scale sport event enhances sense of community. In particular, the research addressed the following hypothesis:

H1. Small-scale sport event volunteers’ sense of community will increase following their volunteer experience.

Method

Volunteers from a small-scale sport event held in Ontario, Canada, were recruited. The event was deemed small-scale based upon the competition pool (~1,000 athletes), the number of volunteers (N=262 registered volunteers), and the number of paid staff (~10) associated with event operation and staging. Participants were given a survey (i.e., in-person, pencil and paper) to complete at the pre-event orientation session. During the last two days of competition, volunteers were approached a second time to fill out an exit survey (i.e., in-person, pencil and paper) regarding their volunteer experience. Volunteers who did not complete a pre-event survey were also given the opportunity to complete a survey regarding their volunteer experience during the last two days of competition. Both pre-event and exit questionnaires consisted of demographic items (e.g., gender, age, sport affiliation), as well as a modified version of the 21-item Sense of Community in Sport Scale (SCS) (Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013). The SCS was adapted to represent the sport event volunteer population as opposed to an athlete sample context for which the scale was originally assessed. The data were subject to a confirmatory factor analysis, basic descriptive and frequency statistics, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests to detect changes for the sense of community factors between pre-event and exit study conditions. The population of volunteers included N=253 registered individuals.
who completed their registration through an online system. Of the total 253 volunteers, N=141 returned valid and usable survey responses (n=75 pre-event, n=66 exit only).

Results

For the CFA, maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) was used to define the model. The goodness-of-fit indices revealed that while the chi-square statistic was significant ($\chi^2/df = 4.38, p=.000$), the six-factor 21-item measurement model did not fit the data. As a result, modification indices greater than five were reviewed, and both statistical and theoretical justification for item removal was employed. The scale modifications resulted in a 5-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 3.11, p=.000$) with 15 items that adequately fit the data. Given the relatively small size of the sample and paired samples generated from this small-scale sport event, the sample may have been too small to detect significant differences, thereby increasing the probability of Type-2 error. Therefore, it was deemed more appropriate (albeit less robust) to assess SCS factor differences by comparing all pre-event to all exit data (N=141). This initial analysis revealed that all sense of community factors increased from the pre-event to the exit condition. The largest proportional mean changes were seen for common interest (Mpre=5.23, Mexit=5.78 / 7.00), equity in administrative decisions (Mpre=5.19, Mexit=5.75 / 7.00), and social spaces (Mpre=5.93, Mexit=6.33 / 7.00). ANOVA analyses indicated one statistically significant difference for the SCS factors between study conditions (common interest). This result, again, is likely attributed to the relatively small sample size for the event. In fact, a power analysis (see Cohen, 1988) revealed the analysis was slightly underpowered (TT=.56) relative to the sample size (N=141), p-value ($p<.05$) and the magnitude of the sought effect size (i.e., small to moderate). ANOVA statistics did reveal several large (proportional) mean score increases for common interest, equity in administrative decisions, and social spaces.

Discussion and Implications

The results surrounding equity in administrative decisions may be in line with Wicker’s (1979) manning theory in that this factor of sense of community is developed based on the utility felt by participants and the availability of multiple (useful) roles; concepts that may be particularly relevant to sport managers in small-scale sport events where a small number of individuals are recruited to fill several diverse roles. Further, the proportional increase of common interest and social spaces may support the claim that the volunteer experience provides individuals the opportunity to interact with one another to develop a common bond and shared interest (Costa et al., 2006; Green & Chalip, 1998, 2004). This result supports the notion that the volunteer experience provides volunteers and staff with a socialization process whereby individuals become acquainted with the language, expectations, and relationships associated with their new role (Taylor et al., 2008). Thus, if sport managers implement practices that promote common interest and shared social spaces, the resultant ‘sport, community, and volunteerism’ connection of the volunteer experience may enhance sense of community. The insight gained from this study of a small-scale sport event supports further research on sense of community within other sport event types, including multi- or single-sport events and large-scale sport events. Additional directions for future research will be presented.