Exploring Sense of Community among Older Adult Volunteers in Community Sport

Luc Cousineau, University of Waterloo
Katie Misener (Advisor), University of Waterloo
Lisbeth Berbary (Advisor), University of Waterloo

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In their most recent update of demographic data, Statistics Canada reported that for the first time in Canadian history, the number of Canadians over the age of 65 exceeds the number of Canadians under the age of 15 (Statistics Canada, 2015). The Canadian federal government also projects this trend to continue, with the proportion of Canadians over the age of 65 growing even further over the next two decades (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). The implications for this change in the population are significant for non-profit organizations, as older adults (over the age of 65) offer a unique perspective and represent a significant potential asset within the voluntary sector, carrying with them years of work and life experience which can be utilized in both programmatic and management roles. Currently, only about 35% of older adults in Canada choose to volunteer, although these volunteers give more hours on average than their younger counterparts (Turcotte, 2015). The literature related to older adults volunteers has identified physical and mental health benefits from this activity (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003). Volunteering in retirement also enables older adults to use their skills, develop social connections, and stay active (Chambré, 1987; Price, 2007). Further, the experience of volunteering together may contribute to a sense of community, which leads individuals to feeling like they belong and can rely on one another for social support (Okun & Michel, 2006; Sarason, 1974).

In the sport volunteer context, there has been a surprising lack of research examining how sport volunteering can enrich well-being among older adults. The limited research to date suggests that volunteering in sport may provide a unique and meaningful activity in retirement and later life through the opportunity to use and develop skills, build social connections, and stay active (Hamm-Kerwin, Misener, & Doherty, 2009; Misener, Doherty, & Hamm-Kerwin, 2010). These studies were guided by theory focused on individual experiences and constraints (e.g., serious leisure; Stebbins, 2004), where the results point to the centrality of personal interactions and social aspects of volunteering in enhancing the volunteer experience and ensuring retention (Misener et al., 2010).

Sport and sense of community theory (Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013) has been advanced within the sport management literature as a multidimensional theory of factors that foster a sense of community including administrative consideration, common interest, competition, equity in administrative decisions, leadership, social spaces, and voluntary action. While this theory has been primarily applied to athletes, Kerwin, Warner, Walker, and Stevens (2015) have applied this theory within an event volunteering context and found that all of the factors except competition showed a statistical fit with the event volunteer data, and three factors in particular (common interest, equity in administrative decisions, and social spaces) were statistically enhanced following the event. Their research suggests that sense of community may provide important insight in a volunteer context. This work also highlights the importance of expanding theoretical frameworks to reflect the nuances of different contexts and population groups. Thus, understanding the relationship between volunteerism and sense of community is critical to ensuring that this pursuit enhances quality of life in older adulthood.

The purpose of the current project is to understand how older adults may experience sense of community through volunteering in community sport. A secondary purpose of the study is to expand the methodological approaches that have been used to study sport volunteering. Accordingly, the study is framed as an arts-based narrative inquiry that utilizes an arts-based focus group and “art”-ifact elicited, life story interviews. Arts-based projects are well established in social and leisure research and employ aesthetic dimensions which may provide an enhancement of perspectives alongside traditional research methodologies (Barone & Eisner, 1997, 2011). Arts-based research, as one form of creative analytic practice, has a power to reach individuals outside of the research community and engage conversations in innovative ways compared to traditional research and representation (Leavy, 2015). Therefore, the research is guided by the following research questions: (1) What expectations of sense of community are desired
within the volunteer experiences of older adults?, (2) How do older adult experience sense of community through volunteering?, (3) What constraints do older adults experience that may detract from experiencing sense of community?, (4) What organizational practices might increase the likelihood that older adults will experience meaningful sense of community?

This study (currently in-progress) incorporates two phases of data collection. The first phase draws together 8 older adult volunteers within two community sport clubs for an arts-based focus group designed to generate collage-based “art”ifacts representing the individuals’ experience/story as a community sport volunteer. These “art”ifacts will be unique to each participant, and will inform the second phase of data collection, where participants from phase one will be invited to participate in one-on-one narrative interviews using their own collage as an elicitation tool (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2011; Leavy, 2015). Interviews will use an unstructured guide, and will serve to develop a narrative reflection of the experiences older adult volunteers and how they may or may not experience sense of community through this volunteer experience. The transcribed focus group and interview data will be analyzed using a contextualizing narrative approach (McCormack, 2004), where similarities and tensions among participants will be re-storied into composite narratives highlighting expectations, experiences, and constraints related to sense of community for older adult sport volunteers.

The narrative representations from this study have implications for community sport organizations seeking to recruit and retain older adults as a potential volunteer resource. It is also expected that the study will advance sport and sense of community theory (cf. Warner, 2016) within the volunteer context and provides new insight into the factors that are particularly critical to older adults. Further, the presentation will highlight how innovative arts-based methodologies can advance sport management research and move the field from post-positivist designs to embracing creative analytic practices.

Selected References:

