(Para)Panamania: The Influence of the Toronto 2015 ParaPan Am Games on Spectator and Volunteer Attitudes Towards Disability

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The opportunity presented by sport events to influence participation, community development, and other social outcomes has prompted recent interest (e.g., Shipway, 2007; Tew, Copeland, & Hill, 2012). Beyond the perceived economic and tourism benefits, major sport events are said to provide the catalyst for the achievement of other potential social outcomes. However, an area of major event studies that has been largely overlooked is around disability sport (parasport) events and the resulting social outcomes (Misener, Darcy, Legg, & Gilbert, 2013; Shapiro & Pitts, 2014). These events are purported by disability sport governing bodies such as the International Paralympic Committee (IOC) to present social change opportunities such as enhancing participation of persons with disabilities, changing attitudes towards disability in general, and developing more accessible infrastructure in the host region. While these are certainly laudable goals, little is known about whether, and how, sport events for persons with disabilities impact positively on these outcomes. There is substantial anecdotal evidence, and recently, some empirical evidence about the potential value of major sporting events such as the Olympics/Paralympics to influence social outcomes (e.g., Waitt, 2003) by capitalizing on factors such as the “festival effect” (Weed et al., 2012), however more research is needed to understand this potentially important opportunity further. With social legacy in mind, the current study focused on attitudes towards disability among volunteers and spectators at a major sporting event (the Toronto 2015 ParaPan Am Games). There is a growing body of literature that focuses on the role of events in bringing about attitudinal changes on social issues. For example, Sherry, Karg, and O’May (2011) have demonstrated that attitudinal changes were evident towards the issue of homelessness, following Melbourne’s hosting of a targeted event, the Homeless World Cup. Similarly, reports from the London 2012 Paralympic Games suggest that this large-scale event had a significant impact on peoples’ attitudes towards disability and even increased employment opportunities for persons with disabilities (Thornton, 2012). Some researchers also suggest that sport could be a context for transformation to support attitudinal change that empowers persons with disabilities (e.g., DePauw, 1997; Steaward, 1996). However, other reports highlight the lack of sustained benefit or change beyond hosting the Paralympic Games (Darcy, 2003; Weed & Dowse, 2009) with little empirical evidence to support claims of attitude change. It is important to recognize that both of these events specifically focused on the target group central to the main sporting program. However, little is still known about the influence of the event on the attitudes of other participants, including volunteers and spectators. Given the parasport communities’ emphasis on the influence of events on attitudes towards disability, this is extremely important to understand, yet the construct of attitude specifically towards disability has yet to be studied in this context. Thus, the purpose of the current research was to examine attitudes of volunteers and spectators at a large scale disability sport event (Toronto 2015 ParaPan Am Games) to gain a more thorough understanding of the influence of the event on attitudes towards disability and awareness of disability and accessibility related issues. The current research was framed around the concepts of inclusion, which emphasizes the need for valued recognition, understanding, and respect of all individuals needs and differences, respect and valuing of human development through the nurturing of skills, capabilities and life choices, and the opportunity and ability, including the necessary resources, for individuals to participate fully in community life. The emphasis of this rights based approach to inclusion is the cornerstone of a critical disability perspective which highlights that ablest assumptions, institutions, and structures are what typically disadvantage persons with disabilities from full participation in community life. Thus, moving away from the predominant understanding of disability as a medicalized impairment of the individuals to one where disability is socially constructed in relation to broader societal structures. From this social model of disability perspective, (dis)ability is an ideological construction emphasising oppressive binaries such as normal/pathological and autonomous/dependent (Goodley, 2014). As a
complex political and social creation, dismantling the social structures which create disability requires an understanding of the socially constructed barriers to full participation in society. From a critical disability perspective, the social structures such as individuals’ attitudes, social support and services, information and communication, and physical structures influence the opportunity of all individuals’ participation in community life (Pothier & Devlin, 2006). The focus is on the complex social structure of attitudes towards disability, which emphasises that typically more positive attitudes, or not underestimating the potential of persons with disabilities, enhances opportunities that can help dismantle disabling structures. This offers a powerful mechanism for addressing inequality and the broader social processes that can enhance quality of life for persons with disabilities (Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Attitudes were measured using the Scale of Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons (SADP; Antonek, 1981). Items assessed general global attitudes towards disability based on the conceptual basis of social inclusion as well as attitudes towards parasport and parasport athletes. Respondents rated each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Additionally, specific items were included pertaining to the awareness and understanding of parasport as it related to the relevant facets of the event. The recruitment of volunteers was done so online through a volunteer database prior to the event for those involved in volunteering at the games and interested in participating in research. Spectators were recruited live on site and in person during the actual event. A total of 3127 volunteers (pre-event), 1476 volunteers (post-event), and 808 spectators (onsite at the Games) completed the survey. The survey was administered and responses were collected through an online survey tool (Qualtrics) whereby data could be then uploaded into a data file through (SPSS 23). Data comparisons were made between groups based on demographic variables as well as overall attitudes and awareness. In terms of overall impact of the games, results indicated that 54% of spectators and 58% of volunteers (post-games) indicated that the Games changed their attitudes towards disability, meaning that 46% of spectators and 42% of volunteers did not experience an attitude change. Attitudes and awareness were also relatively positive for both spectators and volunteers. However attitudes towards parasport were significantly greater than just general attitudes towards disability (M = 5.36, vs. M = 6.43). Awareness levels of the Games were also relatively high for spectators (M = 5.93). For volunteers (pre-games) similar trends emerged. Attitudes toward parasport were significantly greater than general attitudes towards disability (M = 5.29 vs. M = 6.10). Likewise, awareness levels were also relatively high leading up to the games (M = 5.52). Interestingly, there were also gender differences among volunteers and spectators. Female volunteers demonstrated greater awareness and more positive attitudes than males. Female spectators also demonstrated more positive attitudes than males did, however there was no difference in awareness levels. Results are discussed pertaining to the impact of the event on spectators and volunteers (post-games) and the potential implications of these seemingly positive attitudes on actual positive behaviors pertaining to the legacy of the event for a parasport population.