Outcomes of Organizational Identification in Sport Volunteers

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Management - Organizational Behavior (Volunteers)
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Volunteers have become a critical resource in the design and implementation of community-based sport programs (Welty Peachey, Bruening, Lytras, Cohen, & Cunningham, 2015). As the number of voluntary sport organizations increases and attrition rates among volunteers remain high (Green & Chalip, 1998), volunteer retention has become a critical issue for both academics and practitioners. Organizational identification (OID), while an under-explored construct for volunteer sport organizations, may be an important construct in understanding drivers of retention, as it has shown to be in for-pay organizations (He & Brown, 2013). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the role of OID of volunteers on satisfaction, intention to remain, and actual retention.

Literature Review

A large body of research in the organizational behavior literature establishes the importance of OID for organizational members, as the construct has been tied to numerous positive outcomes since its introduction 35 years ago (see Edwards, 2005; He & Brown, 2013 for reviews). Identification develops over time as individuals come to perceive a sense of oneness with an organization, leading to positive organizational consequences including satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1995). Identification is particularly important where there is no monetary remuneration (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995). Literature examining the role of organizational identification for volunteer sport organizations, however, has been sparse. The retention of volunteers has mainly been studied through the lens of motivations and antecedents that promote satisfaction and commitment, such as prosocial motivation and love of sport (e.g. Cuskelly, Harrington, & Stebbins, 2002; Cuskelley, McIntyre, & Boag, 1998). Some research has suggested that these are more robust attitudes than a volunteer's OID in determining outcomes for both volunteer sport organizations specifically (Cuskelly & Boag, 2001) and volunteer organizations in general (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008). In some ways, however, responsibilities and expected outcomes of volunteers have begun to more closely mirror those of professional paid positions (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011; Taylor & Garratt, 2010). Further, sport organizations have been found to be a particularly salient site of identification for fans (Heere & James, 2007; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and participants of activity-based sport organizations (Wegner, Jordan, Funk, & Clark, 2016) both of which result in greater amounts of behavioral engagement with the organization. It is possible, then, that OID plays a critical role in driving higher levels of positive attitudes for sport volunteers, and subsequent retention in the organization.

Further, the construct “intention to remain” with an organization has also been used as a proxy measurement tool for understanding retention numbers. However, recent studies have noted that there is often a significant difference between individuals’ intentions and actual subsequent behavior (e.g., Bodet, 2012; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). This can limit the contribution of studies that attempt to show drivers of retention. Therefore, this study compares the effects of OID on not only satisfaction and intention to remain, but also actual retention.

Method

The organization of interest is an urban non-profit volunteer-based youth sport and development program, which uses marathon running to promote positive outcomes. It partners teams of underprivileged youth (ages 12-18) with volunteer mentor “running leaders” in neighborhood-based teams within a large urban environment. In 2016, a total of 321 adult running leaders were associated with 53 teams around the city, leading two to three practices each week from early March culminating with a 10-mile event in May.

Running leaders were surveyed twice, once at training in January, 2016 (T0), prior to the start of the season, and again in June, after the conclusion of the season (T1). A total of 96 volunteers completed surveys at both T0 and T1, for a response rate of 29.9%. At T0, measures included perceived external prestige (PEP) of the organization (Swanson & Kent, 2014) and psychological involvement with running (Ridinger, Funk, Jordan, & Kaplanidou, 2012).
as antecedents to OID, along with Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) unidimensional scale of OID. At T1, participants were asked again to report their level of OID, along with satisfaction with the organization (Oliver, 1980) and their intention to continue volunteering with the organization (Kim,elladurai, & Trail, 2007). All constructs were measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (7) Strongly Agree. Leaders’ tenure as volunteers in the organization was also captured along with demographic variables. In January of 2017, additional data will be collected directly from the organization that reports retention behavior.

Results
Using independent samples t-tests, we found that at T0, running involvement (MD= .57; t=2.11, p=.038), PEP (MD=.46; t=2.89; p=.005), and OID (MD=.95; t=5.22; p<.001) were significantly lower for newcomers than experienced running leaders. At T1, OID (MD=.002; t=.016; p=.987), satisfaction (MD=.053; t=.618; p=.538), and intention to return (MD=.170; t=.944; p=.348) were statistically the same for newcomers (now with one season’s experience) and experienced running leaders. A repeated measures ANOVA found a significant positive change in OID between T0 and T1, which was moderated by volunteers’ status as a newcomer or a returner (F=42.072; p<.001; η²=.309), driven by newcomers’ positive significant change in the construct.

Discussion
These findings suggest that newcomers and returners start the season as distinct sets of individuals, given that newcomers’ perceived external prestige of the organization, involvement with the activity, and OID were all significantly lower. However, the two groups become similar over the course of the season, with both groups becoming experienced running leaders, such that at the conclusion of the season, OID, satisfaction, and intention to return, were all statistically the same. Collection of actual retention data in January of 2017 will reveal whether a change in OID is truly a factor in retention, or if there are other factors at work that may facilitate intention to remain but not the behavior itself.

These preliminary results also suggest that OID is an important construct for sport volunteer organizations, and therefore focusing on activities that promote a sense of oneness with the program can lead to greater levels of satisfaction and retention amongst current volunteers, in the same way as has been found for other organizations (e.g. Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Swanson & Kent, 2015). Given these results, and that previous research has examined the drivers of OID in general organizations, future research should look to examine the specific drivers of the construct within sport volunteer organizations. Individuals’ identification with sport organizations has been shown to be driven by distinct affective forces across various sport situations, including as a fan of a team (Lock, Darcy, Taylor, 2009), as a professional athlete (Brown & Coupland, 2015), and as a sport team employee (Swanson & Kent, 2015), and therefore, drivers within a volunteer sport organization may also be distinct.