The Volunteer Experience in a Local Para-sport Event: An Ethnographic Approach

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Context and Review of Relevant Literature

While the sport volunteer literature has mainly focused on major sport events, a notable lack in regards to volunteers in a para-sport event setting can be seen. To date, studies in para-sport settings have focused on sport development programs (e.g., Taks, Green, Misener & Chalip, 2014), disabled sport policies (e.g., Nixon, 2007; Kung & Taylor, 2014), organizational structure of disability sport clubs (e.g., Wicker & Breuer, 2013; Misener & Darcy, 2014), event legacies (e.g., Misener, Darcy, Legg & Gilbert, 2013) along with integration and inclusion through physical activity (e.g., Kitchin & Howe, 2014; Pereira, Osborne, Cabral & da Silva, 2011; DePauw & Doll-Tepper, 2000).

Although this gap within the para-sport volunteer literature is demonstrated, the event volunteer literature provides rich insights on key concepts such as volunteer satisfaction, motivation, commitment and sense of community. Satisfaction is defined as how an individual's needs are satisfied, which ultimately influences volunteer retention and future intentions (Aisbett, Randle & Kappelides, 2015; Allen & Shaw, 2009; Heere & Xing, 2012). In turn, motivation has been evaluated from both an extrinsic and intrinsic point of view, and is perceived as a multidimensional phenomenon amongst sport volunteers (Bang & Chelladurai, 2009; MacLean & Hamm, 2007). This has led to the development and application of many theories, such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985) along with various scales developed by Bang and Chelladurai (2009), Farrell et al. (1998) and Clary et al. (1998). For instance, volunteer recruitment and training of volunteers has been associated with Self-Determination Theory, which is correlated to satisfaction, commitment and future intentions to volunteer (e.g., Costa, Chalip & Green, 2006; Chanavat & Ferrand, 2010). Commitment is defined as the strength of an individual's identification while being involved with a specific organization or activity (Mowday et al. 1982). Allen and Meyer (1990) categorized commitment into three distinct types: affective, normative and continuance commitment, all of which can influence future intentions to volunteer (cf. Allen & Meyer, 1990; Park & Kim, 2013).

Among sport volunteers, the sense of community was introduced through communitas, liminality and social leverage, which foster camaraderie and celebration at sports events (Chalip, 2006). Chalip (2006) presented five elements influencing the social value of sports events: enabling sociability, creating event related social events, facilitating informal social opportunities, producing ancillary events, and theming. Legacy of sport volunteers has been related to both social and community factors (Neufeind, Guntert & Wehner, 2013).

Purpose and Research Questions

While the able-bodied sport (event) volunteer literature is rather established, the literature presents a notable gap related to the para-sport event volunteer experience. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to understand and analyze the volunteer experience in a para-sport event from an internal, volunteer perspective. The specific research questions are: (1) How does the para-sport environment of the event impact volunteer satisfaction, motivation, commitment and sense of community?; and (2) How does the volunteer-based organizational structure of the event impact volunteer satisfaction, motivation, commitment and sense of community?

Methods and Timeline

The study examined the volunteer experience in the 2017 Canadian Electric Wheelchair Hockey Association Nationals. The event is organized by a non-profit organization: the Ottawa Power Wheelchair Hockey League. The event will gather teams from across Canada to compete for the electric wheelchair hockey national title from August 4th to 7th, 2017, in Ottawa.

An auto-ethnographic approach is used, as it offers a first-hand perspective of a phenomenon through the combination of both research and writing (Ellis, 2004) in a subjective balanced approach (Kodama, Doherty and
Popovic, 2013). Data collection is comprised of field notes taken by the lead researcher, which includes detail about various behaviors, emotions, customs, and experiences of the participants studied and of the author (Kodama, Doherty & Popovic, 2013) as they pertain to the concepts of interest. A field journal is kept to collect both objective and subjective data such as sounds and sights versus emotions and reflection. Additional ethnographic data collection sources include verbal and non-verbal communication, participant observations, informal interviews and documents (i.e., written and electronic).

The research is currently in the initial stages of data collection. The study will be completed in April. Data analysis will be comprised of a reflective analytic process (Kodama, Doherty & Popovic, 2013), which allows various themes to be indicated within the narrative.

Anticipated Results, Discussion and Conclusions

One anticipated result is that higher levels of satisfaction will lead to the retention of volunteers, which is related to commitment and the feeling of completing tasks (see Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Farrell et al., 1998; Allen & Meyer, 1990). As well, the commitment of para-sport volunteers will likely resemble affective, continuance and normative types of commitment (cf. Allen & Meyer 1990). Preliminary data support this statement, given an volunteers’ observed loyalty to the sport and the event, the lack of volunteer alternatives (i.e., there are no other local volunteer opportunities in electric wheelchair hockey) and positive experiences with the organization, which seems to foster comfort and competence (see Allen & Meyer, 1990). Additionally, the motivation of para-sport volunteers is estimated to be multi-dimensional and dependent on factors such as satisfaction and commitment (cf. Bang & Chelladurai, 2009; Farrell et al., 1998; MacLean & Hamm, 2007). Finally, the projection of a strong sense of community (communitas) is seen with the consideration and involvement of volunteers in the organizational’s structure. Warner and Dixon’s (2011) Sport and Sense of Community theory will be applied to further analyze the findings (see also Kerwin, Warner, Walker & Stevens, 2014).

Contributions

To date, only a few ethnographies have been conducted in the sport management field of study (e.g., Kodama, Doherty & Popovic, 2013; Xing & Chalip, 2009), although they are increasing in social sciences and leisure studies (e.g., Amis & Silk, 2005). This approach will provide deeper understanding of sport event volunteering. The study’s methodology further contributes to the sport volunteer literature through an interpretivist and non-linear research path. Findings from the study will have implications for the sport volunteer literature, para-sport events and disability sport. The study will help to understand volunteers in a para-sport context, thus filling a gap in the sport volunteer literature. Specifically, para-sport event organizers could benefit from the findings to better manage event volunteers. In addition, a better understanding of organizing committees in a para-sport context will allow organizations to effectively structure, plan and deliver an event. Community-based disability sport clubs could benefit from the findings to recruit, train and retain volunteers, as they are an indispensable resource. Finally, the study will contribute to the knowledge of society on para-sport events and disability sport through an insider’s perspective of the volunteer experience, which is a major benefit of an auto-ethnographic approach (Kodama, Doherty & Popovic, 2013).