Settler Volunteers at Indigenous Games: An Autoethnography

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Social benefits, in addition to positive economic impact, have been viewed as important justifications for considerable public investment on various types of sporting events (Chalip, 2006; Jarvie, 2003; Misener & Mason, 2006; Schlenkoff & Edwards, 2012). Sport event volunteerism is often the focus in this discussion for two reasons: sport events would not be possible without the contribution of volunteers (Cuskey, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Doherty, 2009; Green & Chalip, 2004) and that strengthened community volunteerism is recognized as an important dimension of the social benefits accrued by host communities (Ritchie, 2001). However, the current body of knowledge on sport event volunteerism is not without limitations. Acknowledging the wealth of studies on sport volunteer motivation and experience, Wicker (2017) noted the lack of incorporation of cultural, economic or social factors in such inquiry and argued that in-depth analyses of specific groups of volunteers are needed. For example, we know little about the experience of volunteers who are cultural “outsiders” at the event, facing intergroup contacts (Allport, 1979). Also, while the majority of research on consequences of sport event volunteerism has focused on the development of social capital (e.g., Downward & Ralston, 2006; Welty-Peache, Bruening, Lytras, Cohen, & Cunningham, 2015), few have specifically explored sport event volunteerism’s potential in mediating intergroup tensions and bridging divisions between majority and minority groups. Volunteerism is seen in other contexts such as peacemaking and peacekeeping, immigration, and tourism as a useful means to reduce conflict and to achieve mutual understanding of different ethnic groups (Lough & Mati, 2012; Pizam, Uirely, & Reichel, 2000; Ridge & Montoya, 2013) but this element of volunteerism in sport events must be better understood. This gap is compelling, considering that many sport events studied, often involving considerable resource and garnering extensive public attention, are taking place in racially and culturally diverse societies such as Canada and the U.S.

We argue that examining sport event volunteerism within the context of settler colonialism, focusing on settler-Indigenous relationship, will help address this gap in our current knowledge. Canada’s national celebration of its 150th Anniversary of Confederation in 2017 caused widespread protest and criticism from Indigenous Peoples (Palmater, 2017) and the state-sponsored discourse of “reconciliation” was also questioned (Manuel & Derrickson, 2017; Nichols, 2017; Simpson, 2017). It is within this broader social context that two international Indigenous sport events, the 2017 World Indigenous Nations Games (WIN Games), and the North American Indigenous Games (NAIG) were held in Canada in the same year. Despite the cultural significance of large-scale Indigenous sport events such as the North American Indigenous Games (NAIG) (Forsyth & Wamsley, 2006), our understanding of sport event volunteerism within the context of settler colonialism is limited. While Hoober (2010) provided a rare example examining the experience of Indigenous sport volunteers in Canada, little is known about the experience of non-Indigenous volunteers working at Indigenous sport events. Scholars have highlighted settlers’ responsibility to take actions in undoing the harm of colonial oppression and foster a non-oppressive relationship with Indigenous Peoples (Gaudry, 2015; Kovach, 2009; Lowman & Barker, 2015) and one of the important steps in this process includes self-education through direct contact with Indigenous community members (Badali, 2015; Barker & Lowman, 2016). At the same time, Indigenous games organizers believe that volunteering at Indigenous sport events are great opportunities for non-Indigenous people, the cultural “outsiders” in these events, to learn about Indigenous Peoples as well as their diverse cultures and traditions, which may eventually reduce their misunderstandings towards Indigenous communities (Bell, 2017; Milton, 2017). Therefore, the study seeks to answer these questions: How does settler identity influence non-Indigenous volunteers’ experiences at Indigenous games? What is the implication of these experiences to sport volunteers and event organizers?

The first author of this study, an international graduate student at a Canadian University, worked at the 2017 WIN Games and NAIG as a volunteer. Although generally interested in colonialism and social justice, he did not understand thoroughly his own embeddedness with settler colonialism prior to the events. During these games, he experienced significant changes in his perception of Indigenous Peoples, cultures and traditions, developed new
understanding of his own relationship with regard to Indigenous Peoples, and identified himself as a settler. These changes have resulted in further learning and adjustments of his research interests as a scholar. With the understanding that the first author’s individual experience could not be generalized, we nevertheless believe that it will provide valuable insights to the research questions. Autoethnography, because of its emphasis on exploring individual experience in depth in order to understand the interplay of personal and social factors in shaping (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), will be used in this study. Methodologically, sport management scholars have called for more innovative and reflexive approaches to enrich our inquiry (Cooper, Grenier, & Macaulay, 2017; Rinehart, 2005; Shaw & Hoeber, 2016) but, with the exception of Kodama, Doherty, and Popovic (2013), autoethnographic approach is rarely used in understanding sport event volunteerism.

The 2017 WIN games were held in Alberta, Canada from July 1 to July 9th and the 2017 NAIG were held in greater Toronto area, Canada from July 15 to July 23. Consistent with the autoethnographic approach, the first author kept a personal journal throughout the three-week experience, including both objective and subjective records, observations, and reflections. In addition, he also collected Games-related photos, emails, social media communications, and other game-related items such as souvenirs and t-shirts as part of “data”. After the conclusion of the games, the first author engaged in a reflective process to consider the nature and personal meaning of this experience. Because this reflexive process is still ongoing, results cannot be presented here. This autoethnography extends current sport event volunteerism literature by highlighting the first author’s personal experience as a settler volunteer and a cultural “outsider” at the events. The outstanding aspects of this experience will be highlighted and discussed in related to the current knowledge of sport event volunteerism and settler-Indigenous relationship.