Non-Indigenous Volunteers at Indigenous Games: An Exploratory Study

Chen Chen, University of Alberta
Daniel Mason (Advisor), University of Alberta

Student Research Competition Finalist
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Thursday, May 30, 2019
Abstract 2019-039 1:20 PM
Room: Napoleon A1

Volunteers are highly valuable assets for sport events (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Doherty, 2009). While all types of sport events require the participation and contribution of volunteers, volunteerism is a complex phenomenon and is better understood within specific event context (Hoeber, 2010; Wicker, 2017). To date, few research has examined sport volunteerism with the consideration of Indigenous-settler relations in settler states like Canada. While Indigenous leaders like Wilton Littlechild have encouraged non-Indigenous people to be part of Indigenous Games (Chen, Mason, & Misener, 2018), the actual involvement of non-Indigenous people as volunteers, and its implications for our understanding of volunteerism and settler responsibility (de Costa & Clark, 2016), have yet to be examined.

This study aims to fill this important gap. Bridging literature in sport volunteerism and Settler Colonial Studies, it examines non-Indigenous volunteers’ experiences at 2017 World Indigenous Nations Games (WIN Games), an international Indigenous event hosted in a number of Indigenous communities in Alberta, Canada. The event was of special political significance as it took place simultaneously with “Canada 150”, a celebration questioned by many Indigenous communities (e.g., Palmater, 2017). Despite the political tension, the WIN Games still attracted a number of non-Indigenous individuals to volunteer, including the author of this study, a settler of color from East Asia. The unusual dynamics of non-Indigenous volunteers working for Indigenous Games, as well as the events’ special timing, therefore, present an important case to broaden our understanding of sport event volunteerism, particularly the social legacy (Nichols & Ralston, 2011) this type of involvement can leave for non-Indigenous communities seeking to build meaningful and responsible relations with Indigenous Peoples.

This study seeks to understand the perspectives of non-Indigenous volunteers at the 2017 WIN Games. A total of 13 non-Indigenous volunteers were recruited through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Edmonton, Canada between September and December, 2018. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze the audio-recorded interview data. Some key preliminary findings of the study are outlined as follows.

Overall, five main themes emerged from the participants’ experiences volunteering at the event, including Excitement, Responsibility, Intangible Rewards, Work-related Uncertainty, and Cultural Discomfort. While the first three themes highlight that the participants’ motivations to get involved were well fulfilled, the last two themes show that they also experienced discomfort and accordingly, further self-reflection on their own assumptions, with the help of Indigenous community members. In volunteering contexts similar to the WIN Games, this means that non-Indigenous volunteers’ experiences may never be completely “satisfactory” or comfortable. This, however, is integral for an accountable and responsible relationship-building process (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015), illuminating the need for non-Indigenous volunteers to understand the ethical demands of their roles in Indigenous communities by engaging in self-education beforehand, particularly in being ready to accept discomfort and to have their pre-conceived notions unsettled (Regan, 2010). These findings broaden the mainstream understanding of sport event volunteerism and provides important insights for non-Indigenous individuals and groups that are willing to contribute to Indigenous events in meaningful ways and develop critically informed allyship (Smith, Puckett, & Simon, 2016) with Indigenous communities.