Volunteering as Serious Leisure: The Cognitive System of Volunteers

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Research into sport volunteers has primarily sought to understand their motivations and experiences, and often considers the implications for their recruitment, management, and retention (Wicker, 2017). It is noteworthy that although volunteers’ activities may seem work-like, volunteering is undertaken as a discretionary leisure choice, which distinguishes it from work at both psychological and social levels (Lockstone-Binney et al., 2010). Thus, Stebbins (2015) argues that volunteering is best understood as serious leisure.

Despite those insights, the prescriptive literature on volunteer management recommends processes that fundamentally mirror practices applied for paid staff (cf. Conners, 2012). The contradiction between recognizing volunteering as a leisure choice but treating it as another form of work has long been recognized as a conundrum (Henderson, 1981, 1984). The resulting challenge for sport managers is suggested by Cuskelly, Hoye, and Auld (2006, chapter 7) who observe that such practices may need some tailoring if they are to be appropriately applied to volunteers.

In order to understand better the distinctive nature of volunteering, especially in sport settings, it is useful to untangle the conflation between volunteering and doing paid work. How do volunteers see the distinction? What are the management implications? In order to address those questions, the concepts and categories applied to volunteering and work need to be delineated, as those are fundamental to behaviors and choice (Medin & Rips, 2005). Word association techniques have been used to identify concepts and categories in sport marketing studies (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Lebrun, Souchet, & Bouchet, 2013), and have identified differences between the ways that different groups view sport (Lacassagne, Pizzio, & Jebrane, 2006; Piermatteo et al., 2018).

Fifty volunteers (17 from sport and 33 from non-sport settings) completed an online survey in which they were required to provide five words associated with “volunteer,” and five words associated with the phrase “paid staff.” The order of the two sets of associations was counterbalanced to avoid any systematic order effect. Each set of associations was analyzed separately. Words for each were categorized independently by two coders who then compared their categories, and resolved the minor differences via consensual discussion. The words and categories were then given to two other coders to verify that the words fit appropriately into the categories.

Results showed that the concept and category schemata for “volunteer” and for “paid staff” were quite different, as there was very little overlap between the two. In fact, only 17 words were used in both instances. Volunteers were described in a fashion consistent with models of serious leisure, while paid staff were described by associations having to do with careers and instrumental goals. There were negligible differences in the concepts and categories used by sport and non-sport volunteers.

Results are consistent with the view that volunteering is better understood as serious leisure, rather than merely as unpaid work, and that volunteers see themselves in contradistinction from paid staff. Implications for volunteer management, for managing relationships between volunteers and paid staff, and for future research are specified.