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“Everyone rolls up their sleeves and mucks in”: Exploring volunteers’ motivation and experiences of the motivational climate of a sporting event

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ABSTRACT

Research examining volunteer motivation and satisfaction has been criticised for the limited explanation of the cognitive and social processes that may underpin the proposed relationships among motivation, satisfaction, performance and retention (Costa, C.A., Chalip, L., Green, B.C., & Simes, C. (2006). Reconsidering the role of training in event volunteers’ satisfaction. *Sport Management Review*, 9(2), 165–182.; Cuskelly, G., Hoye, R., & Auld, C. (2006). *Working with volunteers in sport. Theory and practice*. London: Routledge.). Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.; Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000a) has proven useful in both for- and not-for-profit domains (e.g., Baard, P.P. (1994). A motivational basis for consulting with not-for-profit organizations: A study of church growth and participation. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 46(3), 19–31.; Deci, E.L., Connell, J.P., & Ryan, R.M. (1989). Self-determination in a work organisation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 74(4), 580–590.; Hollebeak, J., & Amorose, A. J. (2005). Perceived coaching behaviors and college athletes’ intrinsic motivation: A test of self-determination theory. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17(1), 20–36.) and appears particularly suited to understanding volunteer motivation. Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78.). Therefore the purpose of this study was to examine sport event volunteers’ motivation and experiences of the motivational climate at a large sport event using self-determination theory. The participants were volunteers at the NZ Master’s Games held biannually in Dunedin, NZ. They participated in focus group interviews in which their experiences as volunteers at the event were discussed. In general, the findings support tenets of self-determination theory. Participants reported intrinsic motivation toward volunteering but also forms of extrinsic motivation toward some volunteer tasks. With regard to the motivational climate, volunteers experienced support for their autonomy, and felt that their competence and sense of relatedness were fostered. These findings suggest that SDT is a viable framework for examining volunteer motivation.

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The contribution of sport event volunteers has been well rehearsed (Cuskelly, Hoye & Auld, 2006) and the continuing value of this contribution should not be under-estimated. Indeed, there is an increasing need for volunteers as numbers of

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sport events grow, and the size of those already in existence increases. For example the Toronto World Masters Games of 1985 had 8 thousand participants. By 2005, this had grown to 22 thousand. In order for such events to run successfully and sustainably, there must be a pool of motivated and enthusiastic volunteers who are able to perform their roles satisfactorily. To satisfy these precursors for successful events, we need to know more about the complexities and inter-relatedness of motivation, satisfaction, performance, and retention. To date, research on these topics has been atheoretical and lacks explanation of the cognitive and social processes involved. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore the utility of a social psychological theory to understanding volunteer motivation at a multi-sport event.

1. Volunteers' motives and satisfaction

Volunteer motivation and satisfaction have been a focus of research aimed at developing an understanding of factors influencing volunteers' performance and retention (Cuskelly, Hoyle, & Auld, 2006; Stebbins & Graham, 2004). Much of this research describes individual motives or general categories of motives for volunteering (e.g. Fairley, Kellett & Green, 2007; Farrell, Johnston & Twynam, 1998; Knoke & Prensky, 1984). For example, Knoke and Prensky describe three general motives or incentives for volunteering; normative (altruism), utilitarian (self-interest), and affective. With regard to the motives of sport event volunteers, Farrell and colleagues identified four categories of motives: purposive, solidary, external traditions and commitments. Fairley et al. described nostalgia, camaraderie and friendship, Olympic connection, and sharing and acknowledgement of expertise as the four key motives to emerge from their study of Olympic Games volunteers. The connection with the event as a motive for volunteering was identified in both the Farrell et al. and Fairley et al. studies and has been supported by several other studies of large multisport event volunteers (Ralston, Downward, & Lumsden, 2004; Reeser, Berg, Rhea, & Willick, 2005).

In addition to motivation, volunteer satisfaction is considered important because of an assumed association between satisfaction and retention. Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen (1991) stated that "people will continue to volunteer as long as the experience as a whole is rewarding and satisfying" (p. 281). Similar to the volunteer motives research, researchers examining sources of satisfaction have reported a variety of factors that influence volunteers' level of satisfaction. These include the opportunity to expand one's social network, be part of an event, and achieve job competence (Elstad, 1997). In addition, management practices such as facilitating the quality of communication between volunteers and recognition for their efforts have been associated with satisfaction (Johnston, Twynam, & Farrell, 2000). For sport event volunteers, satisfaction has been related to communication between volunteers and the recognition of volunteers' efforts (Farrell et al., 1998; Reeser et al., 2005).

Identifying volunteers' motives and sources of satisfaction is an important step to understanding volunteer performance and retention. Recently researchers have begun to move beyond this description to explore empirically the relationships among factors that are related to volunteer performance and retention. Costa, Chalip, Green, & Simes (2006) identified relationships among contribution, community, commitment, and job satisfaction among non-specialist event volunteers.

Although a step towards developing our understanding of how satisfaction might be facilitated, previous research does not explain *why* relationships exist and therefore what might be predicted in future or different contexts. To date the volunteer literature in the area of motivation, satisfaction, performance, and retention only describes motives, antecedent factors, and empirical relationships. There is a lack of clear theoretical frameworks that can explain the cognitive and social processes that underpin the proposed relationships among motivation, satisfaction, performance and retention. With a better explanation of why relationships exist among these factors, those working with volunteers will be better placed to predict future volunteer behaviour and therefore provide empirically based guidance for those working with volunteers.

2. Working with Volunteers

The motivation and satisfaction research has been used to provide recommendations for managers (paid or unpaid) working with volunteers to enhance performance and retention. A consistent recommendation to managers is the 'matching strategy' (e.g., Clary & Snyder, 1999; Farrell et al., 1998; Reeser et al., 2005). This is, to adapt HRM processes to cater for, or match, volunteers' motives and satisfaction with tasks and thereby facilitate motivation and satisfaction and enhance performance and retention. This management strategy of 'matching' volunteers' tasks with their motives, and/or sources of satisfaction, is based in traditional HRM practices and on the assumption that a match can be made between volunteers' motives and interests and organisations' strategic and operational requirements (Cuskelly et al., 2006). While these traditional HRM practices may be effective, they assume a direct relationship between practices, motivation, satisfaction, performance and retention and ignore the complexities of volunteer motivation (Cuskelly et al., 2006). That is, they ignore why such relationships exist. With a clear theoretical foundation researchers and practitioners would be able to move beyond describing motives and suggesting 'matching strategies' and move toward a clearer understanding of *why* these relationships exist and therefore be able to predict *how* to facilitate them in different sport event contexts.

3. Volunteering and self-determination theory

Although there is no universally accepted definition of volunteering, Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth (1996) suggest four key dimensions of volunteerism: free choice, no reward or financial interest, within a formal organisation, no connection to

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