Towards a Model of Diversity and Inclusion for Sport Volunteers: A Narrative Inquiry of the Experience of Diverse Volunteers for a National Sport Governing Body

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Introduction

Volunteers are essential to the functioning of sport organizations. Volunteers perform a variety of tasks including coaching, management, marketing, and fundraising (Sharpe, 2006). Within sport volunteers, diversity and inclusion is important for organizations from both a business perspective, and a social justice perspective. From a business perspective, having diverse volunteers expands the reach of the organization (Meyer, et. al., 2016), and research indicates organizations with diverse teams process facts more carefully, and develop more innovative solutions (Díaz-Garcia, González-Moreno, & Sáez-Martinez, 2012). Further, sport scholars suggest that diversity and inclusion is a matter of social justice, and not simply a performance related cause (Spaaij et al., 2018).

Despite the clear importance of diversity, diversity and inclusion work in sport organizations is often haphazard, and driven by “champions” rather than systematic policies (Spaaij et al., 2018). Additionally, diversity tends to be managed in response to specific cases rather than through common ideals (Spaaij et al., 2014). Though there has been an increased focus on volunteerism in sport, most of the existing research focuses on volunteer leadership (Wicker, 2017). Given the importance of diversity and inclusion in sport organizations, it is imperative to explore the experiences of sport volunteers of diverse backgrounds. The purpose of this research is, therefore, to explore the experiences of diverse volunteers of a national sport governing body (NGB)

Methods

To meet the purposes of this research, we used semi-structured interviews within a narrative inquiry framework. Purposive and maximum variation sampling was used to identify potential participants. Participants were national level volunteers for an NGB who self-identified as being from a diverse group. In order to achieve a variety of viewpoints, we specifically sought participants from different geographical regions, and different volunteer assignments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via phone and in person with 29 volunteers. Interviews were audio recorded, and then transcribed verbatim where qualitative themes were developed using a narrative inquiry framework

Findings and Discussion

Our findings suggest that the experience of diverse volunteers can be viewed through four general, and often overlapping areas - personal factors, social factors, psychological factors and structural factors. Personal factors include unique perspective, personal responsibility, and assimilation. Social factors include social capital, mentors, and informal political structures. Psychological factors include unconscious bias and microaggressions, and structural factors include organizational barriers, costs, time commitment, and leadership diversity.

Based on these data, researchers developed a continuum to describe a diverse and inclusive organization. For example, a non-inclusive organization includes only bonding social capital that is available to few, does not provide guidance and mentorship unless sought out, roles and positions are determined by social capital rather than skills, and structural issues (e.g. costs, time commitment) make it difficult for volunteers without financial means to engage. In contrast, inclusive organizations determine positions based on skill sets, provided structured mentor opportunities, have leadership teams that model diversity and inclusion, and value the unique viewpoints of diverse volunteers. Results also suggest specific, practical strategies for sport managers to create a more diverse and inclusive volunteer structure.