A Psychological Contract Perspective for Volunteer Retention

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Session: Volunteers I

Abstract 2020-274

Introduction

Volunteers in sport-for-development and peace (SDP) organizations play a critical role since they lead programs towards intended outcomes. To enhance retention, SDP organizations need to strengthen management practices that enrich the volunteer experience (Welty Peachey, Lytras, Cohen, Bruening, & Cunningham, 2014). Most scholarly research has a theoretical and empirical bias favoring developed countries from a Western perspective (Butcher & Einolf, 2017). Therefore, understanding the volunteer experience in non-Western contexts is integral for SDP organizations working in these areas to enhance retention. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between management practices and volunteers’ expectations in non-Western contexts, and to investigate how these organizations influence retention of volunteers through a comparative research project.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Volunteer retention is a critical issue for sport organizations. Lack of volunteers can threaten the existence of organizations, and the replacement and training of new volunteers are costly in money and time (Walker, Accadia, & Costa, 2016). Psychological contract theory has been utilized in studies of employee/employer relations and in the volunteer context (Nichols & Ojala, 2009). There are two aspects to psychological contracts, transactional contracts and relational contracts (Rousseau, 1995). A recent addition to psychological contract theory is the ideological contract (Vantilborgh et al., 2012). An ideological contract should emerge in organizations with a strong emphasis on a cause or values (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003), which fits the approach of many SDP organizations. When psychological contracts are not fulfilled, decreased commitment can occur (Vantilborgh et al., 2012). Moreover, national culture can influence perceptions about expectations and obligations that define an individual's psychological contract with the organization (Kickul, Lester, & Belgio, 2004). Drawing from psychological contract theory, the following research questions were developed: (a) What types of psychological contracts are relevant for SDP volunteers and organizations? (b) Which psychological contract best predicts an organizations' ability to retain volunteers?, and (c) What are the differences (if at all) between psychological contracts in South Korean and Argentinian SDP organizations?

Method

A total of 18 volunteers and six managers were recruited from two SDP organizations in South Korea and Argentina. Data are being collected via personal interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was developed based upon psychological contract theory (Vantilborgh et al., 2012). A priori, thematic coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) is being utilized to independently code all transcripts. To ensure trustworthiness, member checks of transcripts will take place (Creswell, 2012). In addition, translation and back translation are being utilized to ensure that translations into English from both Korean and Spanish are accurate (Anderson, 1967).

Expected Findings and Discussion

We expect to find differences in the psychological contracts between South Korean and Argentinian contexts. Also, we anticipate that fulfilling ideological contracts will help the organization retain volunteers for a longer period of time. These findings will be important for SDP organizations as they may inform strategies to improve volunteer retention. This study will also advance theory on volunteer retention by focusing on non-Western contexts and also by examining the ideological contract, which has not been yet fully explored.