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Applicability of Leisure Theory to Managerial Views on Volunteerism in a Volunteer Managed Nonprofit Organisation: Some Preliminary Findings

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Abstract

This paper explores whether a leisure perspective explains volunteer motivations as perceived by managers of one event-based nonprofit organisation - Victoria's Open Garden Scheme. The results identify that a leisure perspective does not explain all motivations, as some volunteers are socially motivated by a desire to give back to their community. Other motivations are less positive and less voluntary than is expected of leisure and volunteering in a traditional context. Suggestions are made for further research and managerial implications in regards to managing volunteers.

Introduction

Most nonprofit organisations rely heavily on volunteers to achieve their objectives. Volunteers frequently undertake a variety of roles and some organisations are volunteer-managed with few paid staff (Toepler, 2003). Organisations that are managed by volunteers experience different issues than organisations that are managed by paid employees, supported by volunteers (Lee and Olshfski, 2002). Managers of both types of organisations must understand the motivations of their 'voluntary workforce' (e.g., Bussell and Forbes, 2002; Clary et al, 1992) for organisational success.

A service marketing approach would suggest that if nonprofit organisations are to successfully deliver their services they must effectively manage their activities, including managing volunteers (Polonsky & Sargent, 2007; Wisner et al, 2005). There is a plethora of research on volunteer motivations in many contexts including sports and events (see, for example, Andrew, 1996; Cuskelly et al, 2004; Ralston et al, 2004); health and social issues (see, for example, Omoto and Snyde, 1993); and arts/cultural activities (see, for example, Bussell and Forbes, 2006, Edwards 2005). However there is little research that explores volunteering across multiple roles in volunteer managed organisations. This research seeks to address this gap

This research was undertaken within the Victorian region of the Australia's Open Garden Scheme (VOGS), which is a nonprofit event-based volunteer managed organisation. VOGS organises a calendar of "open gardens", when privately owned gardens open to the public and stages special events. The VOGS is managed and operated by volunteers, although three paid staff assist with managing and supporting the volunteer activities. Roles undertaken by volunteers in the organisation include host garden owners, garden selectors, event managers, event staff, and committee members. The research context is important as volunteers undertake the majority of roles in the organisation. Exploring volunteering motivations across roles provides rich data and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of motivations in such organisations, which would possibly not be identified in a more mainstream nonprofit context.

This study aims to gather insights on management's perceptions of volunteer motivations, rather than those of the volunteers themselves, although being a predominantly volunteer managed organisation, some of the managers are in fact volunteers and have undertaken various roles. The research questions driving this study are: Why do people volunteer to the VOGS? Does the leisure typology of volunteering motivations provide insights into this phenomenon? The paper provides a background to motivations for volunteering; a description of the methodology used; presentation and discussion of the results. It concludes with the contributions made by this research, some limitations, and recommendations for further research.

Leisure Motivations for Volunteering

There is a considerable amount of research on volunteer motivations across disciplines. While it is not possible to comprehensively review all this literature in this paper, Clary and Synder (1999) suggest that there are six broad motivational domains, namely values, understanding, enhancement, career, social and protective. Some research has focused on specific volunteer motivations such as the role of altruism (Burns et al, 2006), whereas other research suggests that people volunteer for more personal reasons, namely, egoism (Ereza et al, 2008).

Volunteering has also been viewed as a 'serious leisure' activity (Stebbins 1996, 2001), which involves 'a time of opportunity wherein the individual has the freedom to perceive and select experiences which are either worthwhile or simply gratifying' (Shivers, 1979, p. 15). Some authors further suggest that serious leisure activities redefine individuals, i.e. it "shapes and gives meanings to peoples lives" (Gillespie, et al, 2002). The concept of serious leisure has been embraced in a range of contexts including sports participation (Cuskelly et al, 2002/2003; Green and Jones, 2005) and volunteering, such as working as guides in museums (Orr, 2006) or firefighting (Yarnal and Dowler, 2002/2003).

Beard and Ragheb (1980, 1983) identified four leisure motivational domains, which we suggest can be applied to volunteering: 1) an intellectual domain (to engage in a learning experience); 2) a social domain (the need for friendship and respect); 3) a domain associated with mastery (to achieve or challenge oneself); and 4) an escapism domain (to get away from over-stimulating experiences). Similarly, Unger and Kernan (1983) identified six motivational domains for leisure participation: intrinsic satisfaction, perceived freedom, arousal, mastery, involvement, and spontaneity. From a leisure context, volunteering is likely to be associated with serious leisure rather than casual leisure (Cuskelly et al, 2002/2003). Freedom, however, is a deemed to be a central component of the leisure construct (Moore et al, 1995). This research seeks to explore whether these leisure motivations and perspectives of volunteering apply to VOGS volunteers.

Method

A discovery oriented approach was used to address 'how' and 'why' type questions, which Yin (1984) suggests are best examined using qualitative methods. The data for this study were collected via in-depth interviews of approximately one hour with VOGS' managers who had extensive experience in dealing with volunteers across

organisational roles. The interview protocol was developed to elicit respondents' views of why people volunteer their time to the VOGS; interviews commenced with asking respondents to explain their own involvement in the organisation and their motivations for undertaking their roles, and then explored respondents' views as to why they believed others volunteered their time to the VOGS. The interviews followed Thompson's (1997) suggestion to allow respondents to define and explain concepts and experiences in their own words which has the advantage that meaning is respondent defined rather than being foisted on respondents by researchers. The interview schedule allowed respondents to consider issues that emerged in previous interviews, thus assisting to triangulate the findings from these interviews.

The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. The initial set of motivations was firstly identified by one member of the research team using NViVo 7.0. The transcripts were then independently reviewed by two other members of the research team, to determine whether the first set of themes were appropriate or whether any additional themes should be included (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Spiggle, 1994). Using the revised themes, two researchers then independently re-examined the transcripts to identify the fit of motivations. Comparisons were then undertaken and any inconsistencies discussed to ensure consistent categorisations. Following this, the motivations were clustered taking into consideration the relevant literature.

Findings and Discussion

The iterative approach to analyzing the data resulted in 14 management-perceived motivations for volunteering, which while they potentially overlap in some instances, they can be viewed as discrete motivations. These are presented later in this paper in summarised and paraphrased form as length constraints preclude integrating managers' responses. Within the discussion of the motivations, numbers (in brackets) identify the 14 different motivations, but do not indicate levels of importance. The research found that the 14 motivations were not equally applicable across volunteer roles and this needs to be explored in more depth in the future.

Within the data, three of Beard and Ragheb's four leisure motivational domains (Intellectual, Social and Mastery) were identified. However, their Escapism domain (to get away from over-stimulating experiences) did not arise. In fact, the managers suggested that individuals were sometimes motivated by sensation-seeking as they were attracted to the 'rush' associated with the events. This is consistent with the excitement motivational domain identified by other researchers in an event volunteerism context (Hanlon and Jago, 2000), which reinforces this study's finding that one of the 14 motivations is of relevance to an Excitement Motivational Domain Similarly, the 14 motivations largely accord with Unger and Kernan's (1983) six determinants of leisure with the partial exception of their Perceived Freedom domain which they found to be invariant across situational perspectives. At least two motivations identified in this study are not completely voluntary and therefore are contrary to this quality of leisure and of volunteering in a traditional context.

Respondents identified a number of instances where volunteers are motivated for social reasons (1) relating to a need for friendship and respect. A separate motivation is for social networking (2) where volunteers seek out opportunities to develop

networks and find like-minded people to spend time with. While these two motivations are positive, that is they pull people towards volunteering, other individuals appear to be pushed towards volunteering by a desire to fill a personal void or gap (3), in their lives such as the death of a spouse, children leaving home, or entering retirement. For some volunteers acknowledgement and respect (4) for their achievements motivates them, which is more egoistic than other motivations and particularly applies to some who open their garden. Respondents also felt that ongoing encouragement (potentially acknowledging the volunteer's contribution) is an important factor for ensuring individuals continue to volunteer.

A number of motivations identified can be included within the mastery domain, that is, to achieve or challenge oneself. Some individuals seek career and personal development (5) with the former creating networks of relevance to developing career prospects, and the latter take on new challenges and/or apply their past experiences. Another set of motivations relates to elitism (6), with volunteers wanting to 'uphold standards' in gardening. This motivation is particularly pertinent to the selectors whose primary role is to determine which gardens to include in the VOGS. Within the mastery domain some volunteers (host garden owners, for example) took this a step further focusing on their participation as a competition (7), even though there is no formal competition in operation within the VOGS. The VOGS managers find that some host garden owners want to have the best garden, most visitors, or raise the most money and request feedback on these self-defined measures of 'success or wining'. Also overlapping with mastery to some extent, is the previously identified excitement motivation domain whereby volunteers see their participation as an exciting activity (8). In particular, the managers identified this motivation for some volunteers involved in organizing events or opening their gardens.

One motivation can be included within the intellectual motivational domain, with some volunteers wanting learning experiences (9), which in some cases relates to knowledge transfer by either gaining new knowledge, sharing existing knowledge or both. Thus the motivation potentially differs if one is interested in sharing with others (i.e., more altruistic) as compared to gaining new knowledge (i.e., more egoistic).

As noted earlier, applying existing leisure motivation theories only partially explains volunteers' motivations. The managers suggested that some volunteers are motivated to be involved because of the organisation's societal objectives and its underlying philosophy (10). This type of motivation has been identified in other literature on volunteering; thus it is not new but it has not yet been included in the leisure perspective of volunteering. For example, Perry (2000) suggested that volunteer motivations may be precipitated by the values of the hosting organisation and a range of other authors have looked at altruism as a motivation for volunteering (Burns et al, 2006; Rehberg, 2005). As with the other domains, there is a range of particular motivations associated with this broader societal or altruistic motivational domain. As mentioned above, some volunteer because of the organization's values and its charter. The managers suggested that others volunteer because of an underlying motivation of social responsibility (11), that is, these volunteers want to give something back to the local community. Linked to being socially responsible, is a desire to support charities more generally (12). This arises predominantly for garden owners who are able to direct monies raised through entry fees to charities of their choosing. For these volunteers, opening their gardens is a way to support a charity of their choice.

The two final motivations also can be included within the broad social domain, however both of these are less positive than the others. Managers identified that some people volunteer because they feel obligated to support family or friends or the VOGS more generally (13). In some cases this was expressed as a sense of obligation or almost coercion on the part of others. For example, volunteers in one management role frequently take on other roles because it needs to be done or no-one else volunteers, or when a volunteer opening their garden, presses their family or friends into service during the opening. The final motivation relates to a sense of inertia (14), where the managers noted that some people volunteer because this is "what they have always done". These two motivations have not been identified in the existing literature on leisure volunteering or general volunteering. This may be because these activities do not involve completely voluntary participation, which is a requirement of volunteering in a traditional context.

Conclusions

This study sheds light on management-perceived motivations for volunteering to a nonprofit event-based organisation when volunteers undertake multiple roles. While a case study research approach has some inherent limitations and only the views of 'managers' were examined, this study makes some advances to volunteerism. First and foremost we found that the leisure perspective towards volunteering does not appear to cover the range of volunteering domains, nor all of the specific motivations. Secondly, we identified some volunteering motivations that have not arisen in the past literature such as a sense of competition or elitism. This also includes some potentially negative motivational issues of obligation to others and inertia. Thirdly, in organisations where volunteers undertake multiple roles, clear distinctions between motivations associated with each role are harder to explore and understand, as well as to manage. Managers' perceptions of volunteering in a volunteer dependent organisation suggest that motivations may differ based on the specific volunteering role being undertaken. This issue requires further exploration in future research. Furthermore, although this research did not explore how volunteer roles or motivations evolve overtime, it may be the case that there is some progression or evolution of both (Cuskelly et al, 2002/2003). Therefore future research of how volunteer motivations (and possibly roles) evolve over time could be valuable to ensuring that volunteers have some 'volunteering career path' within an organisation.

The findings also provide practical insights on managing volunteers. Organisations might allocate roles to match with volunteer motivations. For example, someone motivated by a sense of competition might be more effective in fundraising than more strategic roles where they do not see a direct return on effort. For organisations where volunteers undertake multiple roles, there is a need to consider how the broader pool of volunteers can be increased (Meyer and Hyde, 2004) to minimise any potential volunteer burnout. Broadening the pool of volunteers may inadvertently change the organisational focus, which in turn would affect the organisation's existing volunteers who participate because of the organisation's existing core focus. Therefore any broadening of the volunteer base needs to be done sensitively to maintain the core volunteers who are essential for the delivery of the organisation's services.

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