

TOWARDS A GREATER CONCEPTUAL CLARITY OF SPORT VOLUNTEERISM

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Abstract

Introduction

The role of volunteerism in modern society has been gaining increasing recognition both in academic literature and political debates. Sport volunteerism in its various forms accounts for over a quarter of all voluntary work in a number of countries. The term volunteerism, however, remains vague and its conceptualisation is under-investigated. As a result, uncertainties about what constitutes good practices and how these should be promoted persist. This paper seeks to fill this void by establishing a greater conceptual clarity of volunteerism through a systematic review of current Western-dominated literature. The synthesis includes a definition of volunteerism and its six-dimensional conceptual framework. The implications of this conceptualisation for sport managers are also discussed.

Defining Volunteerism

Conceptual definitions are important because they shape our understanding of various phenomena. In the case of volunteerism, there is no unified understanding, and difficulties in defining volunteerism are believed to be a result of "its cultural and religious foundations, and its political influences" (Rankopo, Osei-Hwedie and Modie-Moroka, 2006: 9). Broadly speaking, the various definitions in current literature revolve around two main categories. The first category interprets volunteerism as volunteering or volunteer activity/ work and is process oriented. This is evident from major policy documents such as *The legal position of volunteers in the United Kingdom* (Association of Voluntary Service Organisations and European Volunteer Centre, 2003). The second regards volunteerism as a kind of pro-social behaviour, as found in the works of Penner (2002) and Lichter, Shannahan and Gardner (2002). It places the focus on the normative aspects of volunteering. Drawing from an extensive analysis of literature this paper arrives at a synthesised understanding of volunteerism as:

A set of pro-social behaviours that involve all kinds of productive volunteering, whether informal or formal, carried out for the benefits of people locally, nationally or internationally, on the basis of free will of volunteers, who may be motivated by their culture and/ or religion and driven by non-monetary individual goals.

Conceptualising volunteerism: a six-dimensional conceptual framework

The review of literature allowed identifying six key properties of volunteerism including its essence (free will and being unpaid), components (volunteers and volunteering), forms (formal and informal), sources (altruism, individualism and patriotism), scopes (local/regional, national and international), and functions (service-oriented, self-fulfilment, enhancing employability and social development, see Figure 1). Various interpretations of individual properties, in different cultures and countries, as well as their relationships, are taken into account, and altogether contribute to forming a comprehensive conceptualisation of volunteerism.

Implications for sport management

The current conceptualisation of volunteerism allows sport managers to see the key properties of this concept and the linkages between them. Moreover, this improved conceptual clarity aids managers' understanding of the key processes and functions involved in the recruitment, selection, training and rewarding of volunteers.

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