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June 15, 2015

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Natalie L. Smith, *University of Illinois at Chicago*

Andrew Pickett, *Texas A&M University*

Adam Cohen, *Texas Tech University*



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The New Gap Year: Exploring the Outcomes of Long-Term International Sport-for-Development Volunteering for American Millennials

Natalie L. Smith, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Andrew Pickett, Texas A&M University

Adam Cohen (Advisor), Texas Tech University

Socio-cultural

Friday, June 5, 2015

**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Capitale)**

Abstract 2015-108

11:25 AM

International volunteer opportunities have expanded rapidly over the last decade, making “voluntourism,” one of the fastest growing alternative travel markets in the world (Conran, 2011). In fact, more than a million Americans travel internationally to volunteer each year (Lough, Sherraden, McBride, Xiang, 2014), most of whom are under the age of 24 (Lough, 2009). The sport context, in particular sport-for-development and sport-for-peace initiatives, has included volunteerism as a crucial component to sustainability and success (Donnelly, Atkinson, Boyle & Szto, 2011; Levermore, 2008). Despite their reliance on volunteers, however, little attention has been paid to the impacts that these international experiences have on the volunteers themselves. Further, much of the research surrounding international volunteering has focused on short-term trips in which volunteers are only briefly exposed to the host culture and largely avoid many of the challenges associated with acculturation (see, for examples, Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004, and McGhee & Santos, 2005). Thus, the current study looked to address this gap, evaluating the motivations and impacts that a long-term international experience with a sport-for-development initiative had on volunteers from the United States.

We adopted a functionalist approach to addressing these questions, using a framework that suggests volunteers are motivated by six functions, potentially involving multiple motives for the same volunteer behavior (Clary & Snyder, 1999). These functions include Values (morals or ethics), Enhancement (desire for personal growth), Career (gaining experience from a career perspective), Understanding (the desire to gain skills), Social (desire to meet new people), and finally, Protective (volunteering to assuage personal guilt). In addition to these motivations, researchers have found that a Love of Sport dimension is often important in sport-for-development initiatives (Welty Peachey, Cohen, Borland & Lyras, 2013).

Understanding volunteer motivation is particularly important in the functionalist approach, as expectations developed through organizational messaging often shapes the satisfaction and repeat volunteer intentions of participants (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene, & Haugen, 1994). Further, even in the short-term volunteer context, motivation is largely affected by the functional benefits of a volunteer opportunity (Clary et. al, 1998). The study took place in Grenada, Nicaragua, with an organization called Soccer Without Borders (SWB). SWB is a multinational development organization that uses sport as a hook to engage young people in a support program that encourages social and educational growth for participants. Particularly, in Nicaragua, the program focuses on empowering girls to overcome much of the social inequality that they face by creating a space for them to be active, providing supplies that allow them to remain in school, and creating career connections that they otherwise may never make.

Interaction with key stakeholders and volunteers within SWB was of great importance. Thus, a case study methodology (Yin, 2003) was used, as it allowed for an in-depth examination of the experiences of these international volunteers. Specifically, we conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with nine individuals: three volunteers from the United States that had been volunteering for one year and three volunteers that just began their experience (each of whom recently graduated from college and were in the age range of 22-25), two local Nicaraguan staff members, and the program director. Each interview lasted 45-75 minutes and was audio-recorded and later transcribed. The interviews with the two local staff members were conducted in Spanish and transcribed to English.

Additionally, findings were triangulated through observational data (as suggested by Creswell, 2012), collected by the

researchers over the course of a month spent in the country. This included time spent observing volunteers working with participants both on the field and in the classroom, and interacting with local community members and leaders in social settings. These observations served to help ensure greater levels of credibility and trustworthiness in our data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, once all data was collected and transcribed, each of the researchers began an individual analysis guided by volunteer motivation literature from the functionalist perspective, which provided a priori categories to support the coding process. The authors also acknowledged the potential of unique themes beyond the literature to emerge thus utilizing a process that allowed the raw data to further inform the analysis (Thomas, 2006).

Our findings suggest that the SWB volunteers were motivated by five of the seven functions outlined in our framework: understanding, career, enhancement, social, and love of sport. The two prominent themes of motivation were career and understanding. Highlighting these findings, participants suggested: “I want to learn skills that I am going to take away from this that will help me further” and “learning Spanish was definitely one of my top priorities.” With numerous volunteer programs available now, volunteers were particularly motivated to choose Soccer without Borders in Granada because of the longitudinal structure of the program, opportunity for cultural immersion, and language spoken in Nicaragua. Beyond skill development and career opportunities, the volunteers noted the opportunities to gain “life skills” such as adaptability and understanding the complexities of a long-term international experience (enhancement). Finally, our findings recognized affiliation as an athlete was an important motivational factor to volunteer for a SFD initiative (love of sport) along with the opportunity to create deeper social connections with each other, with local staff and the children (social).

Interestingly, while a great deal of international volunteering occurs due to desires to help ameliorate the problems of a developing country or reduce the guilt one might have based on their current living situation (Gage & Thapa, 2012), this did not emerge in our data (values and protective). This further illustrates how the SWB volunteers chose to donate their time for personal gains and skill development rather than out of obligation or pressure.

This research extends the line of work concerning volunteer motivation in a sport-for-development context. While the growth international volunteering in recent years has received its share of criticism on its true value and impact (Simpson, 2004; Raymond & Hall, 2008) our findings highlight important outcomes that can emerge from these experience. As this type of organization continues to grow and the millennial generation continues to seek out these opportunities for various forms of skill building through a sport they love, this research has important implications for volunteer program design and recruitment.