

# **UNDERSTANDING VOLUNTEER AND NON-VOLUNTEER CONSTRAINTS: A MIXED-METHOD APPROACH**

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## **Introduction**

Volunteer activity has benefits for both the community and for individual volunteers. As volunteers work together to accomplish common goals they build social capital, thus making the community a better place for all to live (Connolly, 2002/3). Individual volunteers can also accrue a number of personal benefits, such as acquiring skills and developing friendships. While the benefits of volunteering have been recognized, research has shown that the percentage of Canadians volunteering declined from 31% to 27% between 1997 and 2000 (NSGVP, 2000). Understanding barriers that people face in deciding to volunteer should help reverse this trend.

Special events provide a particular opportunity for volunteer activity in the community because a large and diverse group of volunteers is usually needed to successfully host these events. Recruiting enough individuals with the appropriate skills and abilities, and sufficient time and commitment, is a major challenge for volunteer recruitment committees. A number of researchers (e.g., Doherty, 2003; Farrell, Johnston & Twynam, 1998; Saleh & Wood, 1998) have examined motivations and barriers experienced by special event volunteers, but no research has been conducted with those who do not volunteer for these same events. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore barriers experienced by both volunteers and non- volunteers. Studying both these groups provides a more comprehensive understanding of constraints to volunteering. The 2003 Canada Winter Games, Campbellton-Bathurst, NB, provided a unique opportunity to study both groups. The extensive effort to attract 6,000 volunteers from the 50,000 people in the region made it possible to identify non-volunteers.

A number of scholars (e.g., Green & Chalip, 1998) have noted that volunteering can be considered a leisure activity. Consequently, the literature on leisure constraints was used for the conceptual foundation of this study and the leisure constraints model proposed by Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991) provided the framework. Constraints can be defined as A factors that are ... perceived by individuals to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure@ (Jackson, 1993). Crawford et al. (1991) distinguished three categories of constraints: Intrapersonal constraints relating to interest and perceived ability; Interpersonal constraints relating to having someone to participate with; and Structural constraints pertaining to time and scheduling barriers presented by the leisure activity. In this study, we considered the appropriateness of these constraint constructs in the context of special event volunteering.

## **Method**

We used a mixed-method approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) to explore constraints to event volunteering from the perspective of volunteers and non-volunteers. Phase 1 involved the operationalization of Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Structural constraints with respect to event volunteering. We developed a 28-item structured questionnaire based on a review of the volunteer constraints literature and a pilot study with 20 individuals who did not volunteer for the 2001 Canada Summer Games. Data

were collected by means of telephone surveys, in the language of choice, with individuals who did and did not volunteer for the 2003 Canada Winter Games. Minor wording changes were made to the survey to make it appropriate for each group. Data were also collected concerning volunteer interest and various demographic factors. The results of Phase 1 revealed support for six sub-categories of constraints within the three general constructs for both groups: Intrapersonal constraints – lack of attraction to the event, sport, or volunteering general, and lack of skill/ability; Interpersonal constraints – social barriers; and Structural constraints – time conflict, concern about the organization of the event, and personal costs. Internal consistency assessments using Cronbach's alpha ranged from .61 to .87.

In Phase 2, which is the focus of this presentation, the intent was to delve further into common themes related to constraints to Games volunteering. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three separate groups of volunteers and non-volunteers, comprising 6-7 participants, for a total of 13 volunteers and 7 non-volunteers. Participants were asked to reflect on any barriers they experienced with regard to Games volunteering. We content analyzed the transcribed data using a constant comparative method (Patton, 2000) to assign data points to the previously identified sub-categories of constraints, and to consider whether any new categories of constraints emerged.

## **Results**

Analysis of comments made by volunteers and non-volunteers provided strong evidence of Structural constraints, moderate evidence of Intrapersonal constraints, but only limited indication of Interpersonal constraints. Varying levels of support for sub categories within the Structural and Intrapersonal constraints identified in Phase 1 of this study were also apparent.

Both volunteers and non-volunteers identified a number of Structural constraints. Time was a constraint because of conflicts with work and/or family and difficulties in scheduling. One volunteer noted, "I was quite worried about scheduling. My wife's schedule is very different from mine... She does shift work and there were times when we had to worry about baby sitters,..." One of the non-volunteers stated, "I thought of it, I really did, I considered putting my name in as a volunteer for the Canada Games. However, when I thought about it a bit more, the barriers I faced, first I have a two year old child. My child was two years old at the time and I was doing a bit of supply teaching". The personal costs, including expenses incurred, were identified as a barrier by some volunteers. Many volunteers and non-volunteers were concerned about the actual organization of the Games. One non-volunteer noted, " .... none of the people that were actually hired..., they never seemed to be available, there was always an answering machine I could never actually speak to anyone. I think from that point on I felt that there might be a lot of incompetence in the direction here with the people that were running the show".

Intrapersonal constraints focused on ability constraints and lack of attraction to volunteering, sport and/or the Games. Lack of skills and language ability were identified as barriers by volunteers and non-volunteers. "I had a little bit of reservations, I thought maybe whatever they're going to ask me to do I won't be able to do it." "I'm not completely bilingual and I said maybe a problem there, that sort of held me back from volunteering." A few non-volunteers were simply not attracted to the opportunity. "I

didn't think of volunteering at all. It never entered my mind. I have no interest in sports and I had no interest in volunteering for the Canada Games."

Interpersonal or social constraints were a concern for only one volunteer who stated "not knowing who I would be working with, that was a little bit of a concern to me when I went".

Participants in the focus groups did identify a number of additional constraints including problems with the application process—a Structural constraint,—and fear of the unknown—an Intrapersonal constraint. Difficulties encountered with the application process proved to be a barrier for both volunteers and non-volunteers. A couple of volunteers noted that they had to re-apply or to follow up on their applications. "I had filled out an application maybe 3 months prior to the games. And I don't know whatever happened to it, but it never got processed, it got lost somewhere in the paperwork." A number of participants decided not to volunteer because they could not get the information they wanted. " I tried to go to the website to find information but the website was not available a lot of the time, I made telephone calls early on,... there was always an answering machine I could never actually speak to anyone." Fear of the unknown was of concern to both volunteers and non-volunteers. As one volunteer noted, "I think when people don't know what is expected of them they kind of put the brakes on." One non-volunteer stated, "There was this unknown factor, where will I have to go? I just didn't know what type of volunteering that would be expected of me. And, I think that this unknown factor was a big factor in my not getting up and actually offering my time to volunteer for the games. "

## **Discussion**

Focus groups proved to be an effective method for more fully exploring constraints to event volunteering for both volunteers and non-volunteers. Comments from participants provided support for many of the subcategories identified under structural and intrapersonal constraints. It is perhaps not surprising in our time-stressed society that time factors were an issue for both volunteers and non-volunteers. Many participants had the sense that the whole country was watching to see if the area could successfully host the Games so their concern about how well the Games would be run was an understandable constraint. Because New Brunswick is the only officially bilingual province, language issues are a constant concern, and they naturally arose with the hosting of a national, and hence bilingual, event. Interpersonal constraints, which are often identified as barriers to leisure participation, were not a major issue in this context. This may be due to the fact that potential volunteers are not required to find someone else in order to participate. In general, there was support for the constructs of Intrapersonal and Structural constraints, but Interpersonal or social constraints were less of a factor in this leisure activity. (Crawford et al., 1991)

## **Practical Applications**

Although the volunteers faced barriers when deciding to volunteer for the Canada Games, they were able to successfully negotiate these challenges. Non-volunteers on the other hand could not overcome their constraints. An enhanced understanding of the constraints to special event volunteering may assist recruitment efforts. Addressing constraints may facilitate volunteer involvement and make it possible for non-volunteers

to participate. For example, providing flexible schedules and shorter commitments could reduce time constraints. However, to successfully attract non-volunteers, recruiters also need to consider the unique constraints they face. For example, non-volunteers were less attracted to volunteering, to sport and/or to the Games. Finding ways to make the event relevant, such as identifying other benefits (e.g., economic potential), may draw non-volunteers to the event. Non-volunteers appeared to lack self-confidence with respect to volunteering. Recruitment materials that make requirements and expectations very clear could help reduce the fear of the unknown, lack of skills, language barriers, and problems with the application process.

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