



Young people's perspectives of parent volunteerism in community youth sport



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ABSTRACT

This interpretive study sought to critically examine young people's subjective meanings and experiences related to parent volunteerism in community youth sport. Using a constant comparative method of data analysis, the perspectives of 19 participants from 7 different family units (9 sons and 10 daughters) in Ontario, Canada were examined. The findings call attention to the gendered importance of fathers in highly visible volunteer roles (e.g., coach, game announcer) and the lack of recognition or appreciation for mothers' formal volunteer roles (e.g., assistant coach, league's board of directors) as well as informal volunteer roles (e.g., fundraiser). Moments of conflict in relation to peer groups as well as siblings and the potential for volunteerism to enhance a sense of connection through moments of togetherness and skill development are also emphasized.

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1. Introduction

In all sports, volunteers are the lifeblood – “take away the volunteers and the sport dies” (de Cruz, 2005, p. 83). Indeed, the investigation and importance of sport volunteerism has been the focus of several published special issues in the *European Journal for Sport Management/European Sport Management Quarterly* (1999; 2013) and *Sport Management Review* (2006). Community sport forms the largest sector of sport volunteers; however, volunteerism at the grassroots level remains relatively understudied relative to elite and professional sport organizations (Cuskelly, 2004). Within the delivery of community youth sport programs, the contributions of parent volunteers are particularly noteworthy and instrumental (Cuskelly, 2005; Nichols, 2005). Yet, the existing research has failed to take into consideration the potential impact of volunteer roles on the family unit. This is surprising given it may influence parental volunteer interest and commitment towards a youth sport organization. Research that seeks to understand the meanings and experiences of parent volunteerism within family life might provide a more holistic understanding of how to better enhance the experiences for the parent volunteer and that of their family.

Moreover, limited research has sought to understand young people's perspectives of their parents' volunteer labor within community youth sport organizations. This oversight is unfortunate as there is inherent value when involving young people in the research process, particularly within the family context. As Jeanes (2010) argues, young people may perceive things differently from their parents, and for this reason, it is imperative that young people's perspectives are understood.

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Thus, the purpose of this paper was to critically examine young people's discourse around parental volunteerism in community youth sport organizations. The gender ideology of *soft essentialism* (Messner, 2011) provided a guiding theoretical concept. An inductive qualitative approach was used that conceptualized the young people as active participants in the research process, capable of speaking on the meaning of their own lives. The context for this research is particularly relevant given that "millions of children play community-based youth sports every year, and these athletic activities are a key part of the daily lives of many families" (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009, p. 50).

The data come from a larger study that included in-depth interviews with all family members who resided in the same household. The focus of the analysis for the larger study was on understanding the discourses that individual family members used when they talked about their multiple roles and experiences within the youth sport culture. However, the young people's discourse was described in different ways from their parents in that the young people appeared to have little knowledge of the meanings that the parents' drew from their experiences (e.g., obligatory and purposive nature of volunteering). Likewise, the parents appeared to have their own interpretations and meanings drawn from their volunteer labor that seemed to center on the "politics" of their experiences related to organizational policies as well as disagreement with other parents within the sporting community (e.g., other coaches). Thus, given these very different perspectives, the present article is limited to analysis of the young people's interviews. For a discussion of the families' shared meanings and experiences related to organized youth sport and the multiple roles that family members embody within this context, refer to Trussell (2013).

2. Literature review

2.1. The gendered dimensions of parent volunteerism in community youth sport

As Doherty (2006) points out, "sport volunteerism is critical to the sport industry itself, and to the voluntary sector as a whole" (p. 105). Although there are many definitions, arguably, volunteering includes aspects of being unpaid, freely chosen, and for the benefit of others or oneself (Cuskelly, 2004; Cuskelly, Taylor, Hoye, & Darcy, 2006). Volunteers in community-based sport organizations fill many different positions and responsibilities including coaches, referees, umpires, judges, scorers, timekeepers, trainers, and other roles that assume off-field positions such as commissioners, board members, treasurers and secretaries (Cuskelly, 2004; De Knop, De Martelaer, Van Heddegem, & Wylleman, 1999; Kim, Zhang, & Connaughton, 2010). The time spent in these roles may vary from a few hours a week to a substantial amount. For example, in her study of a Little League Baseball association, Grasmuck (2006) estimated that 111 league administrators, head coaches, and assistant coaches contributed a total of 33,330 h of volunteer labor in a season – an average of about 300 h per person per season. In addition to these hours, the association expected parents of approximately 500 households to provide four hours of domestic-related duties during the season (e.g., kitchen, field, or bathroom duty).

It is clear, too, that youth sport volunteers are more likely to become involved because their children participate in the community sport league (Doherty, 2006). For example, Busser and Carruthers (2010) found that the majority of coaches had a child on the team (90%). Research has reported that men tend to be more involved in youth sport volunteerism, are married with dependents at home, 35–44 years of age, and with a significant proportion having post-secondary education (Busser & Carruthers, 2010; De Knop et al., 1999; Doherty, 2005; Doherty, 2006; Kim et al., 2010).

Yet, a critical examination of volunteer labor reveals that mothers are also heavily involved in youth sport volunteerism, in an invisible or informal capacity that may be difficult to measure. Indeed, key qualitative studies in Australia (Thompson, 1999), Canada (Trussell & Shaw, 2012), the United Kingdom (Kirk & MacPhail, 2003), and the United States (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009) highlight the gendered dimensions of volunteer work in youth sport organizations. In that, although fathers often fill the visible, highly public and formalized volunteer roles (e.g., coach, assistant coach), mothers fill the hidden, behind-the-scenes periphery roles (e.g., fundraiser, "team mom", "taxi driver"). Moreover, this hidden volunteer labor is essential to the success of community-based youth sport organizations, yet it is not formally recognized. Messner and Bozada-Deas (2009) argued that this lack of recognition towards women's contributions emphasizes the devaluation of their invisible labor. As those authors point out, although team moms may typically put in fewer hours of labor than the head coach, in some cases, they put in more time than fathers who are assistant coaches and are only seen on game day (e.g., coaching third base).

Thus, the research undertaken in this area illustrates that parent volunteerism, and the multiple roles that parents may dedicate to their children's sport organizations, is critical to youth sport participation. Research has also indicated the potential gendered dimensions that may be evident within the context of the organized youth sport culture. But as Jeanes (2009) argues, where are the young people in our understanding of youth sport and parent involvement? As she points out: "Very few studies of how family, sport and leisure interact have included the viewpoint of children. This is therefore a fertile and key area for development, with multiple questions to address" (p. 200). Research that examines young people's perspectives of their parents gendered youth sport volunteer labor remain understudied, and this paper seeks to address this gap in the literature. Research that emphasizes young people's perspectives may also help illuminate the significance of the volunteer-parent/child-athlete dyad in youth sport and how it shapes familial dynamics. The next section will consider the limited research on the dual role of parent-coach/child-athlete and the impact on their relationship.

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