



Cross-cultural event volunteering: Challenge and intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Globalization and increasing number of international events makes cross-cultural volunteering a popular phenomenon when combined with the greater mobility of people. Focusing on a volunteer's experience at four events in New Zealand and China, this paper aims to explore the challenges and intelligence that encountered at such events. Earley and Ang's cultural intelligence framework is used to explain what contributes to successful cross-cultural volunteering experiences. Drawing upon the autoethnographical data and a critical discourse analysis of volunteer handbooks and emails, the results identified a four-dimensional schema to explain the autoethnographical perceptions of what is termed a 'dual' volunteer experience. The analysis suggests that cultural intelligence leads to an enhanced experience, while a lack of intercultural effectiveness leads to challenges. Recommendations for cross-cultural volunteering practice are also presented.

1. Introduction

The main concern for individuals living and working in a multi-cultural environment in today's global society is how to work with people from other cultures and how to be successful in cross-cultural settings. This broad question has been addressed for decades by many disciplines and from many differing theoretical perspectives (e.g., Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2008; Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006; Lynch & Hanson, 1992). With the purpose of developing intercultural competence, a variety of international volunteer programmes (e.g., gap year) and volunteer tourism programmes have been developed all over the world. The rise of such opportunities has been accompanied by a growing body of literature focused on understanding how these programmes increase individuals' intercultural understanding and competence (e.g., Hammersley, 2014; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012; Palacios, 2010). Nonetheless, there has not been as much attempt to explore participants' feelings and performances during the cross-cultural experiences. Only recently have scholars identified that there are different challenges for international volunteers who often struggle to 'do the right thing' (Mangold, 2012; Trau, 2015).

Such challenges are particularly prominent among international events, during which a large number of volunteers with different cultural backgrounds undertake a wide range of tasks associated with operations and administration. In the last decade, a plethora of research from around the globe has emerged predominantly focusing on volunteer motivation at events and, to a lesser extent, on a variety of issues

related to volunteering at sports events (Smith, Lockstone-Binney, Holmes, & Baum, 2014). Although event volunteering is increasingly popular, one area that remains underexplored in the literature is individuals' volunteer experiences. Until now, little attention has been paid to the challenges volunteers face and their performance at events in a new culture, and even less on what contributes to a successful cross-cultural event volunteer experience. With the increase in cross-cultural volunteering opportunities, it is of great importance to explore the large number of volunteers' experiences, not only for volunteers themselves, but also for the event organizers. It is anticipated that findings from the research on volunteers will also provide useful insights for other expatriate experiences and cross-cultural contacts.

The need for such literature is responded to in the present study, which explores the first author's volunteer experience at four events both in New Zealand and China, aiming to explore the cross-cultural volunteer experience and to identify theoretical explanations of the challenges and intelligence. Methodologically, to gain a degree of emotional depth rather than just to analyse quantitative data (Barron & Rihova, 2011), a qualitative research approach is chosen as a research strategy. Specifically, the study draws data from auto-ethnography. Based on autobiographical narrative and self-analysis, the collaborative auto-ethnographers analyse the challenges and intelligence of the event volunteering experiences from the theoretical perspective of cultural intelligence (CQ).

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2. Literature review

2.1. Cross-cultural volunteer experience

With the increase of globalization, for a variety of reasons growing numbers of people go abroad to volunteer. Therefore, cross-cultural volunteering has been a key issue in the study of volunteering since the early 1970s. Scholarship is generally concerned with the benefits of cross-cultural volunteering (e.g., Lough, Sherraden, & McBride, 2014; Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008) and certain aspects such as motivation and structural impact factors (e.g., Anheier & Salamon, 1999; Aydinli et al., 2015; Grönlund et al., 2011; Handy et al., 2010). This body of literature has predominantly explored formal volunteer behaviours through volunteer abroad programmes and investigation of informal volunteering is still lacking.

Specific to the event industry, several studies have examined volunteers' experiences, focusing particularly on volunteer motivation and satisfaction (e.g., Bachman, Norman, Hopkins, & Brookover, 2016; Lee, Reisinger, Kim, & Yoon, 2014; Lu & Schuett, 2014). A large body of empirical research has supported the notion that a satisfying experience positively influences intentions to continue volunteering, which engenders a legacy of volunteering (e.g., Bang, Won, & Kim, 2009; Fairley, Gardiner, & Filo, 2016). Volunteer satisfaction literature provides a cognitive appraisal explanation of how volunteers experience and perceive the volunteer activity (e.g., positive or negative). However, volunteer behaviour, performance, and perception towards the experience is identified to be influenced by many individual-level factors like motives, personality, and organizational culture (Cuskelly & Boag, 2001; Cuskelly, Auld, Harrington, & Coleman, 2004; Davis et al., 1999). However, these studies just focus on certain factors and there is no theoretical interpretation to explain the experience. Pauline (2011) highlights the need for event organizers to give volunteers positive perceptions towards their experiences and proposes that one should understand the points of satisfaction for volunteers.

In summary, while there exists a plethora of research intended to enhance the understandings of volunteer motivation and factors affecting satisfaction (e.g., Lee et al., 2014), literature exploring individuals' descriptions and perceptions towards the volunteer experience is limited, and even less research has focused on the performance of volunteers in cross-cultural contexts. From the event organizer's perspective, a better understanding of volunteers' experience and perceptions is crucial to retaining volunteers. This study, then, contributes to this gap based on a belief that knowledge of individuals' feelings about the volunteering experience will benefit future research.

2.2. Cross-cultural volunteering, challenges, and competence

Although the existing literature has provided an optimistic view of cross-cultural volunteering that is often portrayed as an effective way to increase participants' intercultural competence (Raymond & Hall, 2008), research indicates that cross-cultural volunteering can also be associated with challenges, dilemmas, and struggling such as language difficulties and culture shock (Goerisch, 2017; Mangold, 2012; Trau, 2015). In many cases, the volunteers struggle to behave appropriately and do the right things. Although these studies are contextually distinct from events, volunteers at events in different cultures may share some of the challenges experienced by international volunteers, albeit over a shorter period.

Event volunteers in a new culture often face similar situations; challenges may include culture, language, habit, event operation model, as well as stressors from everyday life such as 'humour, intimacy, privacy, etiquette, and formality' (Berno & Ward, 2005, p. 595). While individuals could have different challenges and different perceptions towards their experiences, little research has explored event volunteers' performance and the reasons for individuals' perceptions and behaviours. Given the lack of previous research, it is suggested that

this exploration can be viewed as an initial framework for further investigation of this under-explored topic.

2.3. Theoretical framework

This current research appears to be the first attempt to explore the issue of event volunteering experience in cross-cultural contexts. Such a focus will further our understandings of event volunteer experiences and how to contribute to a successful volunteer experience. To do so, this paper relies on the basic tenets of cultural intelligence (CQ), which refers to individuals' ability to adapt effectively to a new cultural context (Earley & Ang, 2003). CQ involves one's ability to communicate effectively and behave appropriately in cross-cultural situations based on her/his own intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Deardorff, 2008, p. 33). Ang et al. (2007) identified four dimensions for CQ: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural intelligence. By now the development of CQ has been extensively studied, and CQ has provided insights into the understanding of what contributes to a successful international experience (e.g., Chao, Takeuchi, & Farh, 2017; Earley & Peterson, 2004; Ott & Michailova, 2016). Noteworthy contributions to the understanding of CQ include the cultural contexts that increase CQ (Bennett, 2008; Deardorff, 2008), CQ influence factors such as individual capacity, institutional culture, and the nature of the activities (Perry & Imperial, 2001), as well as the role of international experience for developing CQ (Tarique & Takeuchi, 2008).

Cross-cultural event volunteering is inherently full of challenges, where individuals need to cope with a new situation, deal with a new language and new culture, meet new people, and provide service for new organizations. As such, it may be assumed that volunteers with high CQ will be more likely to have positive perceptions towards the volunteer experience; conversely, they are less likely to have positive perceptions if they do not have the CQ to meet the challenges and demands of volunteering in a new environment. A particular advantage of CQ is that it facilitates a comprehensive understanding of individual's capabilities for cross-cultural performance and 'provide insights into general predictors of success across a range of criteria' (Margaret & Gloria, 2008, p. 109).

3. Study methods

As suggested by Coghlan (2012) and Getz (2008), the multi-faceted, complex, and highly subjective nature of event and tourism experiences is best comprehended by individuals who have lived the experience, thus indicating the appropriateness of auto-ethnography. This paper adopted an auto-ethnographic framework with primary data collected by the first author who volunteered at four events in two countries and supplemented this with analyses of related volunteer handbooks, training materials, and emails. This entailed an interpretive qualitative research paradigm informed by social constructivist ideologies, assuming a relativistic ontology, a subjectivist epistemology, and a naturalistic method (Komppula & Gartner, 2013; Kwek, Wang, & Weaver, 2014). The current methodology adopted time-based, sequential records of subjective volunteering experience, rather than survey-based quantitative comparison that only partially reflected the experience. An advantage of adopting auto-ethnography in this context was the ability to be open to any newness, to unfold individuals' perceptions towards different cultures, thereby exploring the volunteering experience horizontally. The hybrid approach, which extended beyond the ethnographer's own experiences, enhanced the reliability and authenticity of the analysis (DeBerry-Spence, 2010). Specifically, this research adopted two key research methods: (a) an auto-ethnography conducted by the first author; and (b) critical discourse analysis – within Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional framework for conceiving of and analysing discourse – of key volunteer handbooks, training manuals, and emails from event organizers.

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