Participatory Philanthropy: Identity Re-Creation through Recreation

Ida Berger1, Lakshmi Ramarajan2

1Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada, 2Harvard Business School, Boston, United States

The goal of this study is to understand how individuals and organizations use participatory philanthropy to produce, exchange and enact social identities. By bringing together, integrating and leveraging a number of diverse research streams the research considers how identity is not only constructed, but also dynamically ‘re-constructed’, renovated and re-created through active recreational charitable activities. The paper uses the Alyn Hospital “Wheels of Love” charitable bike ride in Israel as the context of inquiry.

Three on-going discourses are germane to this work. First is the work of third sector researchers exploring the motivations, propensities and behaviours of individuals engaged in charitable activities. Second is the work of sports sociologists investigating participation in recreational sports. And third is the work of tourism researchers examining challenges and developments in the tourism marketplace. Major policy shifts, socio-cultural changes, demographic patterns and/or technological shocks have created conditions of crises, opportunity and overlap across these three domains. Resolving the crises and taking advantage of the opportunities involves developing a rich, multi-disciplined and integrated understanding of individuals' motivations for and experiences with participatory philanthropy. An understanding of the key motivations and outcomes of participatory philanthropy will contribute to the development of operational strategies of persuasion, influence and management for voluntary sector, public policy and business, decision-makers.

The integration of these three literatures – philanthropy, sports and tourism - can be framed as the intersection of three circles of activity (see Diagram 1). This provides three unique domains of investigation and four domains of overlap. This paper considers a case that falls in the overlap and interaction of all three domains – namely a behaviour that involves philanthropy, sports, and international tourism. Each year the Alyn Hospital “Wheels of Love” charity bike ride attracts four to five hundred cyclists, half from outside the country, for five intense and difficult days of cycling, raising over $2 Million for the hospital. This paper focuses on how training for, raising money for and participating in this international, charity, sporting event contributes to participants’ feelings and self-perceptions. The study uses both qualitative and quantitative methods in the form of analyses of in-depth personal interviews with riders both before and after the ride, participant narratives, on-line journals, media coverage of the event and two rounds of on-line questionnaires. The case is interesting because training for, raising funds for and participating in the event, for foreign riders in particular, represents major investments of time and money, and calls for very strong motivations and commitments to the hospital charity, riding, and Israel. The experience potentially embodies and provides meanings of altruism, giving and charity; health, strength and athletics; and/or adventure, cross-cultural exposure and worldliness. The possibility of accessing and integrating these multiple inputs makes this event a particularly interesting research site.

The results reveal a rich, nuanced and complex set of motivations and equally complex and transforming experiential outcomes. The results bring to light how participatory philanthropy is connected to broader cultural processes situated in place and time and show how participants actively modify, transform and appropriate symbolic meanings encoded in experiences in

Diagram 1: A Framework for Study

Philanthropy

Sports

Tourism

1

2

3

4
order to manifest and fit their particular personal and social circumstances, identities and life
goals. Non-profit organizations, event organizers and sponsors thus become not simply
recipients of charity, event providers or fund raisers, but, rather, co-producers with
participants of both the event and the participant identities. Recognizing and understanding
this co-production process suggests a new way of looking at the structure and management
of such events. This perspective conceives of the recreational marketplace as a
clearinghouse for identity characteristics and inputs, wherein various organizations,
institutions, and other entities supply identity benefits in exchange for the psychological,
physical, and financial resources of a heterogeneous community of participants.

The study suggests several interesting theoretical and managerial implications. First,
appreciating the personal growth and accomplishment benefits of participatory philanthropy
should be useful to scholars in the non-profit and social marketing domains. In particular, the
interaction between participants’ personal, physical, psychological, and social goals and their
philanthropic accomplishments suggests the need for mediated and/or moderated models of
motivation and behaviour. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study
develops a fuller understanding of just how many overlapping motivations interact to drive
behaviour.

Second, for social marketers interested in promoting participatory philanthropy the managerial
task is to identify, develop, promote, and deliver a competitively sustainable portfolio of
sought-after benefits. The growth and financial success of the Alyn Charity Bike Ride
provides an interesting model of ‘best practice’. Understanding both the benefits sought and
acquired, and the manner in which the event is promoted and delivered will contribute to the
development of a richer body of theory and evidence for the growing social marketing field.