

# **The Involvement/Exclusion Paradox of Spontaneous Volunteering: New Lessons and Theory from Winter Flood Episodes in England**

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Final Version accepted for publication in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, May 2016

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**Key words:** spontaneous volunteers; convergent volunteers; unaffiliated volunteers; disasters; floods; community volunteers.

## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the involvement and management of spontaneous volunteers. It develops a new theory – which we call the ‘involvement/exclusion’ paradox – about a situation which is frequently manifested when spontaneous volunteers converge in times of disaster. After reviewing research and policy guidance relating to spontaneous volunteering, we present findings from a study of responses to winter flood episodes in England. Taking together the empirical findings and the literature, the paper analyses elements inherent in the involvement/exclusion paradox and develops a conceptual model to illustrate and explain the paradox. Implications for managers and future research are discussed.

## **Introduction**

Although there is now a well-established body of national and international research on voluntarism and volunteering, studies have mostly focused either on ‘informal’ forms of volunteering (between family, friends, neighbours and associational members) or on ‘formal’ volunteering (under the auspices of organisations and projects) (Lee and Brudney, 2012; Wilson, 2012). Less scholarly attention has been paid to ‘spontaneous’ forms of volunteering which are not readily categorised as either ‘informal’ or ‘formal’.

Spontaneous volunteers (also called ‘convergent’ or ‘unaffiliated’ volunteers) are people who, although not affiliated to ‘official’ non-profit or governmental response organisations, arrive to provide unpaid help at the time of sudden unplanned events, often disasters (1) (Fernandez et al., 2006). They rarely have specialized training for responding to the event and they may, or may not, have relevant expertise (Drabek and McEntire, 2003). Anecdotal examples include people arriving with their own small boats to aid flood victims, people searching for missing persons, people wanting to clear debris after earthquakes, and people offering to give blood.

As spontaneous volunteering (SV) mostly occurs at times of ‘unplanned’ events, it is a transient phenomenon and may not be formally recorded. Thus there are barriers to studying it systematically. This paper seeks to expand knowledge about SV by focusing on the contradictory imperatives which underlie it. Spontaneous volunteers (SVs) can be both needed and, simultaneously, not wanted by disaster managers; a phenomenon that we discovered through this research and call the ‘involvement/exclusion paradox’.

We present an empirical study of one kind of disaster situation: responses to winter flood episodes in England. Images of flooded homes and streets drive empathy and helping impulses. Simultaneously, ‘official responders’ (ORs) can rarely meet all needs due to the

overwhelming demand. Yet while SVs offer an additional resource for those managing a flood response, they may also pose risks (some life-threatening) to themselves and to those they intend to help (Sauer et al., 2014). They may, for example, be unaware of the need for protective footwear and clothing; of the need to keep informed about changing conditions; or of the invisible risks posed by contaminated water and dislodged manhole covers. Thus what we newly identify as ‘the paradox of spontaneous volunteering’ – helpers wanting to be involved, juxtaposed with pressures for managers to exclude them – is manifested intensively in this kind of high hazard situation, although it occurs in many disaster situations.

The English Winter Floods Response Study (WFRS) on which this paper draws was commissioned by the National Government’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). It aimed to describe and analyse the issues surrounding the involvement of SVs by exploring the perspectives of volunteers themselves as well as flood response managers.

The paper begins with a review of research relating to spontaneous volunteers. After outlining the WFRS research approach, it presents our findings about involving SVs during winter flooding. Taking together the empirical findings and the literature, the paper analyses elements inherent in the involvement/exclusion paradox and proposes a new conceptual model to illustrate and explain the paradox. Implications for disaster response managers and for future research conclude the paper.

### **Earlier Literature**

Here we first describe what the literature tells us about spontaneous volunteering and volunteers. This leads to us consider previous research on the role of SVs in a community context and their involvement alongside officials in disaster response and recovery. We synthesise these literatures to highlight the paradox which is the focus of this paper.

## **What is Spontaneous Volunteering?**

Four terms are commonly used in the literature to refer to the phenomenon which is the focus of this paper: ‘spontaneous volunteering’; ‘convergent volunteering’; ‘unaffiliated volunteering’; and ‘walk-in volunteering’. All four terms are applied to transient behaviour in which, as described by Britton (1991, p. 405), individuals voluntarily “come together for the first time to pursue a specific task or series of related tasks prompted by changing, often unexpected, situations requiring immediate action.” Cone et al. (2003, p.457) refer to “the arrival of unexpected or uninvited personnel wishing to render aid”, a definition reflecting the idea of spontaneity as well as ‘convergence’; and Fernandez et al. (2006, p.58) refer to “those who are not with an assigned resource and have not been specifically recruited”, a definition which reflects the idea of being ‘unaffiliated’ to formal response organisations. Drabek & McEntire (2003) talk of “unaffiliated individuals” who may or may not have relevant training, skills or experience. The underlying idea of spontaneous volunteering is memorably encapsulated in the phrase ‘they will come’ (as in Schwarzenegger and Renteria, 2001)

By its nature, most spontaneous volunteering occurs in unplanned situations where citizens are drawn to help, and in which helping activities can incur risks to volunteers themselves and to those they intend to help (Points of Light Foundation, n.d.). SV is conceptually distinct from the activities of volunteers affiliated with, and managed by, formal non-profits; and distinct from activities by paid personnel conducted under the formal auspices of non-profit, governmental or business organisations (Baxter-Tomkins and Michelle, 2009). It is also conceptually distinct from interventions by ‘bystanders’ who respond to an immediate situation because they happen to be there and who are involved only briefly (Darley and Latane, 1968).

The literature also suggests conceptual distinctions between different kinds of non-affiliated helpers or volunteers. Some want to help but want to 'do their own thing' and remain separate from any formal or 'official' responses (Lavine and Thompson, 2004) whereas others do positively want to cooperate with 'official' response organisations (British Red Cross, 2010). Finally there are those who want to respond to an unexpected occurrence by banding together with others, informally (Stallings and Quarentelli, 1985).

### **Who are Spontaneous Volunteers?**

Spontaneous volunteers are driven by a variety of impulses. Many are driven by a commitment to their local community (Milofsky, 2013). Others may seek to turn negative impacts into something more positive (Lowe & Fothergill, 2003); a point which reflects broader volunteering literature which suggests that volunteering can help people to recover from disasters (Rotolo & Berg, 2010).

As regards characteristics of spontaneous volunteers, Michel (2007) found in a study of the response to Hurricane Katrina, that sense of self-efficacy, level of education, religious service attendance and organisational membership all drove feelings of personal responsibility to help victims. Rotolo & Berg's (2010) analysis of nationally representative US data found that those volunteering for disaster relief tasks were likely to be younger and less educated than volunteers in general. Fritz & Matthewson (1957) distinguished five types of disaster volunteers: 'returnees', survivors who return to help neighbours; 'the anxious' e.g. those searching for missing people; 'informal helpers', unrecorded by managers; 'the curious' (also Wolensky, 1979); and 'exploiters' motivated by personal gain.

## **The Role of Spontaneous Volunteers in a Community Context**

Although not necessarily referring specifically to spontaneous volunteering, community and citizenship literatures are relevant here because they look beyond the individual to collective behaviour, seeing volunteering as an expression of community involvement and civil engagement (Forbes and Zampelli, 2012) or a response to a 'vacuum of authority' which can occur in times of disaster (Dynes & Quarantelli, 1980). People often engage in collective behaviour based upon a local consensus about what needs are not being met by formal governmental and non-profit agencies that constitute the 'official' response to a disaster. (Stallings & Quarantelli, 1985). Conversely, formal nonprofits and other 'official' responders can be dependant for their effectiveness on the local knowledge and capacities which community organisations can contribute (Coles et al., 2012; Coston et al., 1993). The links and interdependence between local communities and official responders become particularly important when a surge capacity is required to provide a weight of response that is not available locally from official response sources (Shaw et al., 2015).

Looking at how local residents respond to disasters, the literature employs the concepts of 'community resilience' and 'community adaptive capacity'; the ability to self-organise and adapt (Shaw et al., 2014). The capacity to respond is influenced by local factors such as breadth and depth of personal networks and relationships (Milofsky, 2013) and the prior accumulation of social capital through associational behaviour (Pelling and High, 2006).

The community learning which can occur through experiences of cooperation in response to disasters can further contribute to the building of social capital and civil society and thus impact positively on future disaster responses (Steffen and Fothergill, 2009). Conversely, managers deterring people from spontaneous helping (even if justified as concern about hazards) can ultimately have a negative effect, diminishing community resilience (Nichols et

al., 2014; Tierney, 2003). Deterring people who want to help can also lead to ‘freelancing’; independent actions uncoordinated (and potentially conflicting) with ‘official’ responses (Cone et al., 2003).

### **Spontaneous Volunteering and ‘Official’ Disaster Response**

The literature on disasters also provides insights relevant to behaviour during unplanned events. Most countries have established procedures for dealing with disasters involving networks of formal governmental and non-profit organisations and extensive pre-planning (Waugh and Streib, 2006). Such networks may be characterised by standard operating procedures, centralised authority, reluctance to trust information from outside the network, drives to minimise risk, and reluctance to collaborate with unknown people or organisations (Vigoda, 2002). The networks might include ‘permanent disaster volunteers’ (Britton, 1991) but these are not ‘spontaneous volunteers’; rather they are people who are prepared, trained and managed by a formal organisation, usually a non-profit.

Within the context of established networks and procedures for disaster response, reactions by official responders to spontaneous volunteers tend to be cautious; SVs are seen as outsiders, whose qualifications, skills, background and capacity are unknown and whose credentials cannot be reliably verified (Drabek & McEntire, 2003). It may be thought that if their convergence is not managed, they will overwhelm management resources (Kendra and Wachtendorf, 2003; Quarentelli, 1989). In fact, they might hinder rather than help the official response (Barskey et al., 2007). From this perspective, they need to be discouraged from involvement.

The drive to manage risk (JRF, 2014) is a key reason why ORs may be reluctant to allow SVs’ involvement. In disasters, there may indeed be major risks to volunteers. They may be faced with high hazard situations (Cadieux, 2014) or exposed to distressing events and sights.



They may be subject to burn-out through overwork combined with lack of support (Jaffe et al., 2012). Dyregrov et al. (1996) argue that the psychological effects of disaster volunteering may persist longer in untrained volunteers as compared with prepared ones. More positively, however, the literature also suggests that disaster volunteering can be life-enhancing for volunteers, leading to the development of new careers or continued community involvement (Clucky, 2010; Steffan & Fothergill, 2009).

The tendency for ORs to treat SVs with caution, can be set alongside the finding that disasters can place significant strain on the capacity of ‘official’ response organisations to meet the needs of those affected (Drabek & McEntire, 2003; Quarantelli, 1989). Moreover, volunteers can bring different skills and response ideas which have the potential to free up ORs’ time for other activities (Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003) and thereby extend the ‘official’ response (Fritz & Mathewson, 1957).

These conflicting pressures on ORs to involve *and* exclude spontaneous volunteers, have led some authors to argue for a more coordinated and flexible approach to responding to disasters (Nolte & Boenigk, 2013; Points of Light Foundation, n.d). Penning-Rowsell et al. (2006) suggest that responses should combine government-led interventions designed to protect human and natural environments, alongside self-help behaviour from individuals and communities. Waugh and Streib (2006, p.138) argue that “No one can ever have complete control; it is not possible to fully command attention or to compel compliance”. Thus, in practice, emergent groups and SVs may become part of the overall response.

### **The Paradox of Spontaneous Volunteering**

When the literature on SV and community capacity on the one hand, and on response to disasters on the other hand, are juxtaposed, the paradox introduced at the start of this paper, is sharply revealed. In such situations there is often a need for personnel and other resources

additional to those that can be provided by ORs, from governmental agencies and rescue non-profits (Chikito et al., 2012). And there is often a cohort of SVs who want to help and are encouraged to do so by politicians, media, and community figures (e.g. Cameron, 2014). So, potentially, spontaneous volunteers are a means through which the gap between demand and supply of disaster responses can be filled. Yet, paradoxically, there remain numerous pressures on ORs to deter or exclude SVs, especially in high hazard situations.

### **Winter Floods Study Context**

The organisational framework that operates for flooding in England is multi-layered with National Government setting policy through DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) combined with devolution of responsibilities to localities. The Flood Water Management Act of 2010 extended DEFRA's working relationship with other national governmental agencies. In practice this means management from the centre with the government controlling national resources such as flood high volume pump resources operated by the Fire and Rescue Services. Responsibility for operational control is devolved to Local Resilience Forums which coordinate local resources. Thus various forms of governance, resources, control and scrutiny - operating at the national and local level - shape the roles and responsibilities of ORs (Official Responders).

The English Winter Floods Response Study (WFRS) on which this paper draws, was commissioned by DEFRA which was seeking research-based advice on the involvement of SVs in the response to, and recovery from, disasters such as floods. In England, volunteers are trained and equipped to participate in the (public sector) Fire and Rescue Service, the Police, Ambulance and military activities. They are also recruited and trained to work in and with rescue nonprofits such as the British Red Cross and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, at both the national and local level. Thus volunteers are already embedded in

governmental and nongovernmental organizations which respond to disasters. Yet interest in the involvement of spontaneous volunteers in flood situations only came to prominence in 2011 following several major flood episodes (Shaw et al., 2015).

### **Study Approach**

Our study took an interpretive approach; aiming to explore the issues surrounding SV by gathering perspectives of spontaneous volunteers, as well as those who officially manage flood responses (ORs). In this paper we draw primarily on the second stage of the WFRS in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 participants: with SVs (13 interviews) and people who may manage SVs such as disaster responders (21 interviews) and representatives of non-profits (16 interviews). All interviewees had experienced at least one major flood episode.

Interviewees were identified using the snowball method and selected such that they varied with respect to their experiences of flood situations. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, were conducted face-to-face or by telephone and were audio-recorded with interviewees' permission.

The interview schedule covered topics including allocation of tasks and working practices in flood situations; SV supervision; and collaboration between SVs and ORs. Interviewees were encouraged to express views about possible changes to practice.

### **Data Analysis**

Using interview transcripts, the qualitative data were first analysed to discover their emergent properties through 'cognitive mapping' (similar to mind mapping) (Shaw et al., 2009) which ensured consistency in the way data were treated. This was done by the research team in a series of workshops in which initial themes were identified and defined as well as their

relationships to other themes. To maintain rigor in analysis we then applied a coding technique to the transcripts (Gioia et al., 2012). Often referred to as ‘inductive concept development technique’ the process is drawn from Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) modified version of grounded theory.

First, we applied open coding to interview transcripts to identify recurring themes. Second, axial coding was used to identify higher-level categories by grouping together related open codes. The axial codes were interrogated, removing overlapping categories and identifying core codes. This was done by two investigators who independently worked with the interview material to develop their own classifications. Then a third investigator worked across both of their results to seek commonalities for the whole dataset and balance those with their own reading of the research data. There was strong commonality across the data and the consistency of the findings from the different investigators built confidence in the validity of the emergent themes. In keeping with ‘theoretical saturation’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this continued until no new themes emerged from the data. These core codes were considered in relation to the findings from the cognitive mapping.

For the purposes of this paper, findings from interviews with responders and voluntary organisation representatives are presented together and referred to as responses from ‘ORs’; that is, we distinguish simply between the perspectives of those with experience of being part of the ‘official’ response to flood situations and those with experience of being SVs.

### **Findings from the Winter Floods Response Study**

Findings from interviews with SVs and ORs are presented in this section around four themes, as shown in Figure 1. First, we present results on why SVs get involved in flood situations. Then we present what happens to SVs when they volunteer and the challenges confronted by managers of SVs. We conclude the section with findings on how SV involvement in disaster

response and recovery might be increased. We illustrate key points with verbatim quotes in italics. Quotes not marked 'SV' are from ORs.

[Figure 1 about here]

## 1. Why Spontaneous Volunteers get Involved in Flood Situations

SVs expressed a range of reasons for getting involved during flood episodes. Many empathised with those who had been affected; they had experienced flooding themselves or could imagine being in a similar situation: *"I felt so awful with it being Christmas ... just thought that would be really, really horrible if it happened to us ..."* [SV]. For some, their empathy was for people they knew: *"people that live down there are my friends"* [SV]. Others had a more generalised commitment to the local community: *"I wanted to put something back in the community"* [SV]. Some SVs had become involved in response to a direct request (in person, by telephone or social media) or after seeing others getting involved, so there was an element of social pressure behind their involvement: *"I thought that I should lend a hand since other people were"* [SV]. A note of resentment was reflected in some SV interviews; they had been driven to compensate for what they saw as inadequate responses of 'official' agencies, including fire and police services.

SVs varied in what they had hoped to achieve through their volunteering. Some simply wanted to help those affected by floods to 'normalise' their lives: *"to try and make it as easy as possible to get the stuff out and then start rebuilding"* [SV]. Others wanted to build 'community spirit' by getting local people together to do necessary tasks: *"trying to help as a community base to get the people to try and help one another"* [SV] so that *"If there are going to be problems with flooding in the future ... people are more resilient, more self-prepared, more aware"* [SV].

## 2. What Happens to Spontaneous Volunteers when they Volunteer?

Initial responses by ORs to SVs varied widely between and within flood situations. Some thought that the way SVs get treated on first arrival tends to be “*a lottery*”. Some SVs were rapidly integrated into the official response because they were known to formal nonprofits such as the Red Cross, or as community leaders: “*they were recognised people within the community who had particular roles with the community*”. There were also several examples of SVs being excluded from the flood area for safety reasons, or being passed on by ORs to generalist volunteer-involving organisations outside the flood-affected area.

Between these extremes of rapidly drawing SVs into ‘front line’ involvement or deflection of SVs to other agencies and areas, we were told of SVs being drawn into low-risk tasks; for example, cleaning a rest centre, helping with completion of insurance claim forms, serving refreshments, providing local knowledge to ORs, and securing donations in kind from local businesses. Where SVs were drawn into physical activities linked to the flooding, these were also mostly lower-risk; for example filling-sandbags, clearing flooded properties or ferrying people by road to places of safety.

The preference of many ORs was to involve SVs later in the ‘recovery’ phase, rather than at the time of the initial flooding: “*Drying out the homes, getting rid of their sodden furniture and alternative accommodation for themselves or their pets*”. The challenge then became to keep the SVs motivated so that would respond to being recalled: “*... that’s the concern really is finding jobs for people to do when actually what we need to do is put them on standby during a response so that they can help in the flood recovery because lots of people will need help then.*”

In fact, examples of SV involvement in the recovery phase of a flood were more usually cited than examples of immediate involvement at the start. This capitalised on the upsurge of

helping motivations whilst minimising risk by allowing time for establishing confidence in SVs' abilities and even some minimal training. Some initial SVs were later drawn into task forces of local people who took over recovery activities after the departure of official disaster responders. Others were drawn into providing services to help with daily life after the initial flooding, for example providing transport for medical appointments.

### **3. Challenges for Managers of Spontaneous Volunteers**

Although responsibility for managing SVs in flood situations varies according to area and local resources, a number of common problems around the management of SVs were identified by interviewees.

A primary concern of OR managers was risks to SVs, since they were unlikely to have had training about the hazards posed by flood waters. OR managers wanted to inform SVs about potential hazards; to match SVs to appropriate tasks; and to exclude people who were not appropriately clothed or who they judged to be otherwise unsuitable. In short, if they were going to involve SVs, ORs wanted to have in place suitable selection, training and management structures. As one interviewee put it: *"because if they do just get on and do it we'll end up with more bodies to rescue"*. ORs also wanted to avoid the consequences of SVs putting themselves at risk; for example criticism from politicians or on social media. Interviewees from formal nonprofits were concerned about reputational damage should their organisations be associated with SVs having accidents, behaving inappropriately, or making complaints in social media.

Several interviewees pointed to the delicate balance when managing SVs. *"We want volunteers to feel they are actually bringing something to the community and doing something worthwhile ... but we don't want them to overstep the mark, to feel they can*

*undertake more than their role actually allows them to do.”* On the one hand ORs wanted to minimise risk but, on the other hand, ORs were keen to encourage community response.

A second management challenge concerned communication with emergent groups of SVs. In flood situations, groups of SVs tend to emerge and re-form rapidly, coordinated by SVs themselves and often using social media: *“we got a lot of people on board very very quickly – we sort of took on a control and command perspective, myself and an ex-army colleague”* [SV]. Self-organising groups were to some extent welcomed by ORs who were thereby relieved of some organisational burdens. Simultaneously, such groups posed additional difficulties for them and a drain on limited resources - in coordinating efforts with the overall disaster response. Sometimes these difficulties were intensified as tensions arose between and within SV groups: *“personal power struggles and groups splitting into splinter groups and then reforming in different shapes and names.*

Another challenge for managers was around maintaining links with SVs once they were assigned, or found themselves, tasks. Whereas volunteers associated with formal nonprofits generally operate within set structures and procedures, responsibility for management of SVs can be unclear and pose challenges for both SVs and ORs. Several ways of meeting this challenge were mentioned by interviewees, the most effective of which was thought to be to draw SVs into the procedures and structures of official response organisations; for example, providing identifying clothing, daily briefings in a designated venue, clear working periods, two-way radio communication, and dedicated social media sites. On the other hand, some overstretched OR managers had given up trying to integrate SVs; the effort needed to control SVs and integrate them into the broader official response was beyond their capacity; yet they did not want to discourage enthusiasm to help, so they simply left them to pursue their own goals: *“there was an inability to control them so we let them move the sand to keep them busy”*.



For managers who were involved with overall coordination of an official response, a key challenge was the possibility of SVs taking initiatives without having knowledge of priorities or of what tasks had already been allocated: *“If we turn someone away and they really do want to help, the likelihood is they are going to freelance and that is the last thing we want them doing”*.

Some SVs were happy to be incorporated into the official response and managed accordingly; others were less positive. Some were resentful about being given unskilled or, what they thought of as, uninteresting tasks. Others reported ‘tensions’ between themselves and volunteers deployed by non-profit and voluntary organisations. Close supervision by managers (often the corollary of concerns about risk) made some feel untrusted. Others recoiled from the idea of being incorporated into the official flood response: *“I would actually rather be a volunteer rather than an official kind of thing because then nobody can say to me ‘oh, you’ve broken our rules’”* [SV].

Underpinning responses from ORs about SVs’ involvement in flood response, were not only concerns about risks, communication and coordination, but also a pragmatic challenge around the costs (money and management time) of involving SVs. Many OR interviewees were aware that volunteers are not cost-free; they come with costs of equipment, training, communication and management. In the case of SVs, they might also bring additional insurance-related costs, reputational risks and the cost of deflected management time: *“We were concerned about pressure of resources locally and how best people’s skills and experience that they had to offer could be used and matched.”*

Yet many managers were also concerned about the ‘opportunity cost’ of *not* involving SVs immediately upon their convergence; it was feared that they may either ‘freelance’ (as above) with consequent risks to themselves and to the overall response effort; that they may

publicise their dissatisfaction through social media; or they may be disillusioned and not willing to help at a later stage of recovery: *“because if people turn up and then you’re doing nothing with them ... they’re going to get grumpy, they’re going to tweet about it ... then you’re managing a media problem”*.

#### **4. Scope for Increasing Spontaneous Volunteer Involvement**

Based on their experiences, SVs and ORs interviewees offered suggestions for increasing SV involvement in future flood episodes. One suggestion was for disaster planners to recognise the distinctive contributions that could be made by SVs, rather than trying to incorporate them into the ‘official’ flood response. Examples were given of tasks for which SVs could be uniquely well qualified such as *“being eyes and ears on the ground”*; communicating to ORs what was happening to properties; and tracking needs in a fast-changing situation: *“We could do a lot more with using people’s local knowledge of their neighbours and checking in on each other”*. Additionally, SVs could draw down resources which were not as accessible to ORs; getting donations of cleaning equipment from local businesses for example.

Another suggested approach to involving SVs was for ORs to positively anticipate the probable arrival of SVs when developing local emergency and disaster plans: *“try and get ahead of the volunteers and give them something to volunteer for”*. For example, ORs could have information and training materials prepared for SVs along with identifying badges and clothing. Particular locations could be advertised as places for SVs to converge, to be briefed and collect resources such as sandbags: *“provide them with venues to come to so that that hub becomes the visible rendezvous point that SVs recognise”*[SV]. Planning could also include selection and management of SVs as one of the training topics for official responders.

Responsibility for matching SV skills to tasks could be a pre-assigned role, implementing

plans for registering them, ascertaining qualifications and keeping track of their whereabouts.

A step further from positively anticipating the arrival of SVs would be, it was suggested, to map out beforehand, key local voluntary groupings including faith-based groups, which could be approached to help with rapid mobilisation of additional volunteers in times of disasters. Another suggestion for simultaneously encouraging and controlling the convergence of volunteers was for ORs to put out media messages quickly, specifying what help was needed where, and what qualifications and equipment were wanted: *“put media briefings out to say if you want to come and help can you please turn up at this location”* and *“if you want to bring a boat, the sort of boat we need would be ...”*.

Alongside these suggestions, which recognised the special contributions that SVs could make, OR respondents made suggestions which in effect involved ‘converting’ SVs into regular volunteers under the auspices and control of the disaster response agencies or formal voluntary organisations. For example, it was suggested that people could be trained beforehand to be ‘flood wardens’ and security checked and so: *“you’ve got some form of recognition that people can say ‘yes you are a registered volunteer’”* [SV]. ‘Converting’ SVs in this way was seen as a positive response to issues of ‘command and control’ and to concerns about insurance cover for those who were not an unambiguous part of an official response.

SVs were generally keen to see the creation of local flood-prepared groups of volunteers: *“It would be nice if there were a group of people that would be ready to respond”* [SV]. Yet SV interviewees generally had different perspectives from ORs on how SVs could be used more effectively. They thought that social media and local radio could be used to draw volunteers to the places where they were most needed and to make clear which skills and

equipment were wanted. They also wanted communication between SVs and ORs to be much more of a two-way process of information exchange.

OR interviewees, were generally keen that there should be national and local level guidance about involving SVs: *“to put some boundaries around expectations on volunteers [SVs] and expectations on organisations that need to work with [spontaneous] volunteers.”* Such guidance, it was felt, should be flexible and not too authoritative as it had to recognise how different flood situations and local situations can be. Caution would also be needed to ensure that flexible guidance did not become required policy: *“because if they put out guidance it becomes suddenly not guidance any more, it becomes the manual of ‘this is how you must do it’ ”*. Generally OR respondents felt that it was important for more thought to be given to how best to involve SVs in disaster situations: *“they’re so important and so vital that we have to ... put in a lot of effort between events”*.

## **Discussion**

This paper has explored the ‘involvement/exclusion’ paradox of SV, particularly in high hazard situations such as floods. Broadly, the paradox is one in which people who want to be involved in responding to an unplanned event can face numerous pressures for their exclusion, even when there is, objectively, a need for the help that they are offering and the resources they can contribute. The paradox is essentially about how ‘official’ responders’ and those who converge without prior planning relate to one another.

In this discussion section we consider how our study has expanded earlier knowledge by exploring reasons for ORs’ caution about SVs as well as the perspectives of SVs themselves. We then propose a conceptual model to illustrate and explain the elements which, our study suggests, contribute to the paradox. We offer some practical implications for managers in flood and other disaster situations, and conclude with thoughts about future research.

## **1. Findings and Earlier Knowledge**

Our findings amplify earlier literature. As regards the motivations of SVs, our study suggested a strong element of community attachment in spontaneous volunteering. In fact, it seems the inclusion/exclusion paradox reflects a tension between community-focused assumptions of spontaneous volunteers and the disaster-response focus of OR managers (a point we return to in the next section). Empathy for friends and neighbours are important motivators for SVs in local situations, alongside occasional perceptions that ‘official’ responders are not sufficiently effective (as Dynes and Quarantelli, 1980; Lowe and Fothergill, 2003).

That ORs tend to be risk averse (Drabek and McEntire, 2003; JRF, 2014) was also confirmed by our findings. But we found that this was driven not only by concerns for the safety of volunteers and flood victims but also by concerns about reputational risks and awareness that involving volunteers is not cost-free. We also found that, despite concerns about risks, many ORs were keen to draw in the resources of local communities, especially to capitalise on their local knowledge and contacts and their self-organising capabilities (as Milofsky, 2013; Pelling and High, 2006). Thus generally there was a sense amongst ORs of being pulled between different management imperatives in response to the convergence of SVs; that is they were generally aware of the paradox surrounding SV involvement.

We found examples of two extreme ways of resolving conflicting pressures experienced by ORs: full incorporation of SVs into the official response, or their complete exclusion. This resolved the paradox by abolishing it. But many interviewees recounted more flexible responses such as identifying tasks that utilised the local knowledge and networks of SVs so that they had a distinct role in the response process. Both ORs and SVs made further suggestions for responding to the paradox including anticipating the arrival of SVs as part of

official response planning; utilising offices of local voluntary associations and faith groups to identify potential volunteers; and having a cohort of ‘disaster-ready’ volunteers in every community. Suggestions had in common that they were attempts to combine the most advantageous elements of spontaneous volunteering with some degree of selection, management or control to mitigate the known drawbacks of SV involvement in disaster responses.

## **2. A Conceptual Model**

Our findings suggest that the paradox itself can be understood as a product of four key elements which interplay at the time of the occurrence of a disaster episode (Figure 2). Within each of the elements are a number of variables which can be seen as choices or dilemmas for ORs. From our data, we suggest that interaction between the four identified elements determines the behaviour of ORs and SVs in times of disaster (Ajzen, 1991) and how they may be involved in practice in the response.

[Figure Two about here]

Element One is the ‘operating culture’ within which the response is made. This may include specific guidelines for disasters, or simply local custom and practice, about how SVs should be received; ranging from outright rejection or deflection, through tolerance of freelancing, to acceptance and incorporation into the official response. Attitude of ORs is also relevant; a welcoming atmosphere for SVs may help to set the tone for productive cooperation between SVs and ORs. Culture may also include the degree of social pressure from media and politicians for SVs to be involved.

Element Two in our model is the ‘management approach’ of the ORs. The latter may be totally unprepared for the convergence of SVs or, at the other extreme, the involvement of

SVs may have been an integral part of their strategic planning; in which case they may be confidently welcomed and integrated. Where the involvement of SVs is accepted as part of the approach to managing an unplanned event, there may be a preference for incorporating the SVs in a collaborative manner or the approach may be to keep SVs at arms-length and not accountable to ORs. Either way, managers will decide whether or not to monitor SVs' work. Finally, the management style of the ORs may be of the 'command and control' variety, with a wish to keep SVs accountable and doing prescribed tasks, or it may be more hands-off and empowering, with a preference for giving as much discretion as possible.

Related to the management approach is Element Three which includes matters to do with task allocation within the overall official response. Here a key variable is risk tolerance of ORs. We found a range from zero tolerance of risk to SVs and the population, through to a more open acceptance of risk in the context of an overall response. A second variable relates to criteria used for task prioritisation. The approach of ORs may be to scan the area and identify needs and where SVs could help, or they may use a pre-set schema for which tasks SVs may be permitted to engage with.

Element Four relates to the 'volunteering and community context'. The study has shown how SVs may be seen by ORs as a resource to be invited and 'used' by ORs as and when needed; or, at the other extreme, they may be seen as having an entitlement to participate in the response as they are the heart of the community, able to guide and advise the ORs about needs and priorities and access to further local resources. There is also the issue of how flexible SVs are; will they accept a task from ORs or are they self-directed, willing only to do a task that they want to do irrespective of ORs' judgement about its appropriateness? Linked to this is the motivation for SVs to respond; whether it is to 'self-actualise' (in which case they may stop volunteering when their own needs are met) or whether it is community-focussed.

In a disaster episode, we suggest, the involvement/exclusion paradox plays out in the interaction between the four elements; and the behaviour of both ORs and SVs will be affected by numerous variables which also interact with each other. This helps to explain the wide variation we found in the study between behaviour within and between different flood episodes.

### **3. Implications for Managers in Disaster Response Situations**

The Conceptual Model helps to explain the inclusion/exclusion paradox, and points to the numerous interacting elements behind any one manifestation of the paradox. It will, we hope, be useful for OR managers before and after disaster episodes in teasing out variables to be taken into account when considering the SV involvement question.

For those managers seeking to make quick policy decisions at the time of convergence of SVs in disaster situations, our study suggests five principles for involving SVs.

- A. Anticipate convergence of SVs (e.g., plan principles for involvement and risk assessment; consider risk mitigation; have a system for greeting and noting contact details; avoid immediate rejection)
- B. Avoid thinking that the only choices are to exclude or to incorporate SVs into the official response (e.g., consider tasks with low risk; consider tasks which the community can organise with minimal official management; assess the resources inherent in the local community)
- C. Be aware of the possible need for ‘surge capacity’ which cannot be met by official responders.
- D. Consider community characteristics (e.g., what resources does it have to aid the response; what helping capacities is it exhibiting; how can the community work with



the official responders for mutual benefit; what approaches to SVs and the community now will assist long term recovery.)

- E. Manage SV expectations (e.g., explain likely additional resource needs, tasks and time scales)

#### **4. Study Generalizability and Future Research**

We are necessarily cautious in our claims about the generalizability of our findings and our conceptual model. As regards applicability beyond the flood response case, our findings are likely applicable to other disaster situations in which there is a hazard element and in which local people have high motivation to help. The latter, as our paper shows, is likely to be a function of factors such as community solidarity, empathy with the victims of disaster, community resources, and judgements about the adequacy of the official response.

Do our findings have applicability beyond the UK? Countries vary as to their official disaster response systems and therefore in the expected roles of governmental and non-profit agencies (Alexander, 2002; Waugh and Streib, 2006). Countries also vary in their cultures of volunteering and in the policy expectations on spontaneous volunteers in time of disaster (Hustinx et al., 2010). Nevertheless, our study has potential interest beyond the UK in that it has practical implications for those who are obliged to manage disaster situations; a matter of universal concern.

Future research could consider the applicability of our model to other international and volunteering contexts. It might also consider other hazard contexts to which the involvement/exclusion paradox might apply; for example, offers to care for children or other vulnerable people. Research might also consider the applicability of our findings and model to situations where 'surge capacity' is needed for relatively short periods; for example, to help settle new migrants.

## **Finally**

We began this paper by pointing to the contradictory pressures evident in disaster management where spontaneous volunteers ‘converge’. Our study of English winter floods episodes points to a range of possible resolutions to a new aspect of the management of volunteers – which we call ‘the involvement/exclusion paradox’. The conceptual model which we have developed is intended to aid understanding of the complexity of the forces underpinning the paradox and the ways in which they may be interrelated; a form of ‘useable’ theory which can both explain the paradox and, we hope, facilitate practical responses and management.

## **Endnote**

(1) We follow Alexander (2002) in this paper and use the term ‘disaster’ to refer to large and widespread emergencies involving substantial destruction. They may also be mass-casualty events. Alexander (2002, p.1) defines an emergency “as an exceptional event that exceeds the capacity of normal resources and organization to cope with it”. He distinguishes four levels: “The lowest level involves those cases ... which are subject to the routine dispatch of an ambulance or a fire appliance”. The second level are larger emergencies that require response by a municipality, the third level requires regional resources to be coordinated, and the fourth level require intervention by the national government.

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**Figure 1. The Findings and Themes**

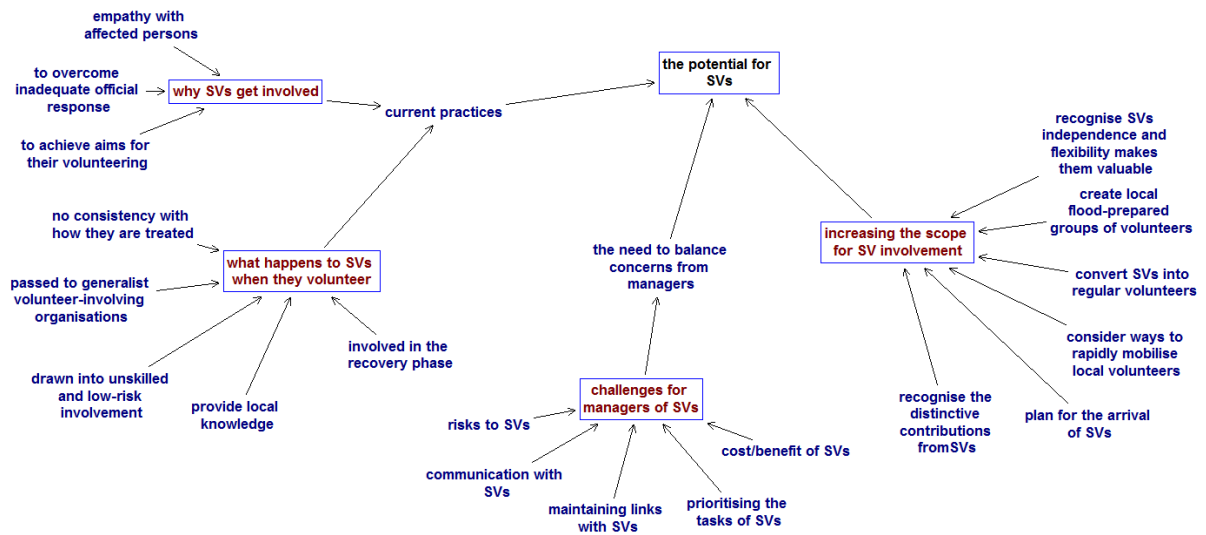


Figure 2: Explaining the involvement/exclusion paradox of spontaneous volunteering

