

ABSTRACT

The modern landscape of emergency volunteering in Australia is characterised by far-reaching change, converging challenges and emerging new opportunities. In this context, a key concern within the emergency management sector today is how the changing landscape threatens the long-term sustainability of Australia's formal emergency management volunteer capacity. Some volunteer-based emergency management organisations are responding to the changing landscape with new volunteer strategies, models and management practices. While the pace of change has picked up in recent years, overall it has been slow.

This paper posits that greater engagement in frame reflexive learning and practice can help enable further and faster adaption of emergency volunteering models and approaches to better meet the challenges and opportunities presented by the changing landscape. It aims to support frame reflexive learning and practice by articulating the different ways that 'what's wrong and what needs fixing' is framed among a range of emergency volunteering stakeholder groups. The results are based on interviews and questionnaires conducted with over 180 stakeholders, including representatives from emergency service agencies, disaster welfare organisations, volunteer representative groups, volunteering peak bodies, local governments, and community sector organisations. The paper identifies and describes four key frames currently in use by stakeholders: Competition, Professionalisation, Expectation-Capacity Gap, and Culture Clash. It concludes that deeper and wider collaboration at the sector and community level is needed to enable frame reflexive practice through which multiple frames and their implications can be made more visible and a wider range of options for addressing complex cross-boundary volunteering problems revealed.

What's wrong and what needs fixing? Stakeholder perspectives on making the future of emergency volunteering

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Introduction

This paper examines ways that the complex problems and uncertainties associated with making a vibrant and sustainable future for emergency volunteering are framed by stakeholders. It defines emergency volunteering as any and all volunteering that supports communities before, during and after a disaster or emergency, regardless of its duration or its organisational affiliation, or lack thereof. While emergency service and disaster welfare volunteering are central forms of emergency volunteering, there is also a significant amount of volunteering that supports communities before, during and after emergencies, which is 'unaffiliated' with emergency management organisations (EMOs). This includes formal volunteering in the wider community sector, as well as informal, emergent and spontaneous volunteering (Whittaker et al. 2015).

The purpose of the paper is not to find a single 'correct' frame through which to view the future of emergency volunteering. Rather, it is to support frame reflexive learning and practice (Schön & Rein 1994; Fischer 2003). This involves relevant actors collectively, systematically and directly exploring different framings of core problems and their solutions (e.g. "what's wrong and what needs fixing", see Schön & Rein 1994, pp. 24-26). The outcomes of this process can make multiple frames and their implications more visible and reveal a wider range of options for addressing complex problems than might otherwise be considered.

The changing landscape of emergency volunteering

The modern landscape of emergency volunteering in Australia is characterised by far-reaching change, converging challenges and emerging new opportunities (McLennan et al. 2016). On one hand, formal volunteering roles affiliated with emergency management organisations (EMOs) are becoming more demanding with greater administrative and training requirements (McLennan et al. 2008; Esmond 2016). Meanwhile, the availability of people for this kind of formal, long-term, high commitment volunteering is declining due to factors such as structural economic change that has increased competition between paid and voluntary work time; and demographic change, particularly an ageing population, greater participation of women in the workforce, urbanisation, and declining populations in some rural areas (McLennan 2008, pp. 15-17).

Background

At the same time, the way people choose to volunteer, and how they seek to fit volunteering into their lives, are also changing. People increasingly eschew the traditional, formal style of volunteering that is most common within EMOs, choosing instead to engage in alternative forms that are more flexible, more self-directed and cause-driven (Hustinx & Lammertyn 2003). The rise of social media and mobile technology has been an important catalyst for change in emergency volunteering, removing barriers to people's participation in all phases of emergency management and increasing people's capacity to self-organise outside of formal organisations (McLennan et al. 2016).

In this context, a key concern within the emergency management sector today is how the changing landscape threatens the long-term sustainability of Australia's formal emergency management volunteer capacity (Reinholdt 2000; McLennan 2008). The picture is not all grim, however. The changing landscape also opens doors onto new and innovative ways to enable and enhance the value of volunteering for communities before, during and after emergencies (e.g. McLennan et al. 2016). For example, there are new opportunities to increase surge capacity and harness local resources and skills in the wake of an emergency event.

Some EMOs are responding to the changing landscape with new volunteer strategies, models and management practices (see for example QFES, 2018, NSW SES, 2019). While the pace of change in this respect has picked up in recent years, overall it has been slow. Compare, for example, the following two statements:

Securing a long-term future in the current climate of social and economic change is one of the most significant challenges confronting volunteer-based emergency service and support agencies in Australia and around the world.

The emergency management sector is under increasing pressure to develop adaptive emergency management policy and procedures that can respond to current and future challenges. Recent changes to the physical and social landscape in Australia [...] have revealed emerging and veiled volunteer issues.

Despite their similarity, there is almost a twenty-year gap between when these two statements were published: the first in 2000 (Reinholdt 2000, p. 16) and the second in 2017 (BNHCRC 2017, p.18). This paper posits that greater engagement in frame reflexive learning and practice can help enable further and faster adaption of emergency volunteering

models and approaches to better meet the challenges and opportunities presented by the changing landscape.

Framing and its impacts

As Entman (2015) explains in the context of communication, "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Schön and Rein (1994) describe frames in the context of policy-making as "underlying structures of belief, perception, and appreciation" that determine policy positions (p. 23). They too explain that a core function of framing is to articulate a story or narrative about 'what is wrong' (problem diagnosis) and 'what needs fixing' (solution prognosis) (see also Fischer, 2003). Thus, frames shape how stakeholders and decision makers make sense of complex and multifaceted issues in order to chart ways forward for addressing those issues despite conditions of uncertainty.

Frame analysis has been widely used to better understand how politicians, policy makers and policy entrepreneurs shape policy agendas (Schön & Rein 1994; Fischer 2003), how organisational managers design and enact strategy (Kaplan 2008), how the media shapes public opinion (Entman 1993), and how social movement leaders mobilise collective action for a cause (Benford & Snow 2000). It also shows how overly narrow or contested frames can stall action to address key policy and strategic issues. In the context of emergency and disaster management, for example, Boin and t'Hart (2009) examined the impacts of frame contests in post crisis settings, in which political and policy actors fight to frame the nature of a crisis, responsibility for its consequences, and its implications for the future. Which crisis frame wins determines whether the event is followed by policy stalemate, incremental adjustments or a major paradigm shift. Meanwhile, Aldunce et al (2015) analyzed how practitioners frame resilience ideas under institutional change in Australian disaster risk management. They found three different storylines about resilience that, whilst overlapping in some respects, contained distinctive diagnostic and prognostic elements. This frame divergence has led to confusion over how to implement disaster resilience and created implementation barriers in areas such as public education and community capacity building.

A key similarity across this frame analysis research is its focus on the importance of frame reflexive learning and practice for resolving the framing contests and policy inertia that can be caused by divergent and narrow frames. As Bosomworth (2015) argues, "A frame reflexive practice could provide sectors the type of learning capacity needed for adaptive planning and management" (p. 1461). It is the contribution of frame reflexive learning and practice to enabling adaptive planning for the future of emergency volunteering that this paper seeks to support.

Research approach

The data used to examine how stakeholders frame 'what's wrong and what needs fixing' for emergency volunteering comes from over 180 interviews and qualitative questionnaires administered in 2018 and 2019 as part of a wide Environmental Scan of the current and emerging landscapes of emergency volunteering. Table 1, below, provides an overview of who participated in the Environmental Scan, and how. (Note that participant numbers are higher for stakeholder groups where responses were collected by questionnaire as this data collection method does not allow for such in-depth exploration of issues as interviews.) All participants were asked the same series of open-ended questions to elicit their perspectives on recent changes and current issues in emergency volunteering, and on what needs to happen to move towards a preferred future for emergency volunteering. Responses from each stakeholder group were thematically analysed, and the results of each analysis were separately captured (see for example McLennan & Kruger 2019; Kruger & McLennan 2018; Kruger & McLennan 2019 for the first four groups). Results were then compared across the groups.

What's wrong and what needs fixing' in emergency volunteering

The analysis revealed four main ways that the core problem for emergency volunteering is framed amongst stakeholders. They are labelled here as: 1) Competition, 2) Professionalisation, 3) Expectation-Capacity Gap, and 4) Culture Clash. These frames were predominantly revealed in interview and questionnaire data through descriptions of problem symptoms and their causes ('what is wrong'), and descriptions of the change required to enable a preferred future for emergency volunteering (e.g. 'what needs fixing').

Before expanding on the frames further, it is important to highlight that another key area where participant perspectives were sought, their views on what a preferred future for emergency volunteering should look like, produced quite

similar and consistent views across the groups. This shows a high degree of agreement amongst stakeholder groups about the desired outcomes of any policy or strategy change in this area, despite multiple interpretations of the core, underlying problem and changes needed to address it. Key elements of a preferred future highlighted by the participants included (see for example McLennan & Kruger 2019; Kruger & McLennan 2018, Kruger & McLennan 2019): a vibrant, sustainable volunteer capability to deliver emergency management services to communities; formal volunteering that is easy to engage in, accessible, and well-supported by organisations; wide collaboration and capacity-building for emergency management and community resilience goals that reach well beyond emergency service agencies; organisations with strong shared cultures of volunteerism and inclusion; and organisations that are agile, innovative, and future-focused. Two areas where some differences existed were in the degree of participant's commitment to the importance of strong community leadership and ownership in emergency management, and the degree to which involvement of 'spontaneous' volunteers should be risk managed versus enabled. Notably, these differences cut across the stakeholder groups rather than constituting key differences between them. Some participants, most notably those associated with local, community-based community sector organisations, strongly advocated for community leadership and empowerment, and for enabling spontaneous volunteering as a legitimate and valuable component of a societal response to emergencies. Others, particularly from larger and more structured organisations, either placed less importance of these or emphasised associated risks and uncertainties more highly than potential benefits.

Each of the four frames identified are described in turn below. Table 2 provides an overview of how strongly each frame was evident among the various stakeholder groups. It is noteworthy that each of the frames were present across all the stakeholder groups, reflecting the interacting nature of volunteering trends, issues and uncertainties. However, there were clearly discernible differences in the importance and prevalence of the different frames between the groups.

Table 1: Emergency volunteering 2030 Environmental Scan participants.

Stakeholder groups	In-depth interviews	Survey questionnaires	Other	Total
Managers in emergency service volunteerism	18	-	-	18
Managers in disaster welfare & recovery volunteerism	16	-	-	16
Local government managers	17	-	-	17
Community sector representatives	2	46	-	48
Volunteering peak bodies	6 (group interview)	-	7 (direct report input)	13
Emergency service volunteer group representatives	1	75	-	76
Total	60	121	7	188

Table 2: Presence of frames amongst Environmental scan participant categories (red=strong; yellow = moderate presence).

	Competition	Professionalisation	Expectation-Capacity Gap	Culture Clash
Managers in emergency service volunteerism				
Managers in disaster welfare & recovery volunteerism				
Local government managers				
Community sector				
Volunteering peak bodies				
Emergency service volunteer representatives				

Competition

Looking through the Competition frame, the core problem for emergency volunteering is mounting difficulty in recruiting and retaining formal volunteers in the face of the changing landscape of volunteering. According to this perspective, changes in how people want to volunteer, social changes impacting people's availability and desire to volunteer, and growing numbers of - often digitally-enabled - alternatives to traditional volunteering with formal organisations, all work to 'pull' people away from formal, long-term volunteering with organisations and threaten the long-term sustainability of the volunteer workforce:

People are less likely to commit to long term volunteering. They are time poor. They have a much more expanded list of opportunities [for] where to commit their time.

Emergency service volunteer representative

It's come from an understanding of where the national and international trends are going around sustainable volunteerism models and the emergence of new volunteerism groups and what makes them attractive. You look at that and go, 'okay, here's what we're up against. Our traditional models will not survive in this area.

Manager in emergency service volunteerism

This is certainly a dominant frame within the emergency services, and the wider emergency management sector, being

strongly reflected in descriptions from managers and volunteer representatives with emergency service (response) organisations, and from managers working in disaster welfare and recovery volunteerism. The symptoms of this problem were widely discussed by these participants, and to a lesser extent by participants in the other stakeholder groups. They include, for example, the rise of short-term volunteering, declining volunteer numbers, high volunteer turn-over, and ageing volunteer bases.

Two priority areas of action arise from this frame. First, redesigning volunteer models, management and engagement practices to make formal volunteering more competitive, attractive, flexible and accessible to a wider and more diverse range of (particularly younger) people. Second, developing deeper engagement and connection with communities to increase both organisational understandings of communities as well as community understandings of emergency management, risk, and emergency volunteering.

Professionalisation

The core problem viewed through the Professionalisation frame arises from formal volunteering becoming more professionalised in line with corporatisation, bureaucratisation and growing government regulation. While this shift has improved safety and service quality, it has also created additional and significant barriers and disincentives to volunteering. Moreover, some participants described a growing disconnect between the bureaucratic and structured procedures of organisations and the more organic ways that communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies. Key symptoms of this problems include increases in red tape and organisational control of volunteers, higher volunteer training requirements, 'scope creep' in volunteer

roles and higher volunteer workload, greater numbers of volunteers feeling undervalued & dissatisfied, and bifurcation

of the voluntary sector more widely between 1) highly professional and 'business-like' organisations, and 2) local, informal, grassroots organisations:

Increased corporatisation, substantially more direction and orders from career bureaucrats, ...as a result it is no longer as relevant or connected to community. [The organisation's] key strength as a community-based and driven organisation is being replaced by the notion that it's a professional emergency response service. It is both, but the pendulum and momentum is all focused on the latter and not the former.

ES volunteer group representative

With professionalisation comes a disconnect between the leadership and the community.

Community sector representative

This frame was most evident among emergency service managers and volunteers, who reported that these shifts were particularly strong in their organisations. There are, of course, strong interactions between the forces emphasised under this frame and those of the Competition frame. The external changes highlighted under the Competition frame operate as "pull" factors that draw people away from more traditional, formal volunteering roles. Meanwhile, the changes emphasised under the Professionalisation frame are "push" factors that further exacerbate recruitment and retention challenges by undermining volunteer motivations and satisfaction and driving people away from volunteering.

Interestingly, while both managers and volunteer representatives used these two frames, managers tended to emphasise negative recruitment impacts of "pull" factors more strongly, while volunteer representatives tended to emphasise the negative retention impacts of "push" factors. In line with this, there are also differences in the solutions arising from the Professionalisation frame compared to Competition, even though both focus attention on making formal volunteering easier and thus more sustainable. The Competition frame emphasizes changes to make formal volunteering more attractive and accessible to a wider range of people (i.e. making emergency service volunteering more competitive with alternatives to improve recruitment), while the Professionalisation frame emphasizes a need for organisations to provide greater support to existing volunteers and reduce the administrative and training demands placed on them (i.e. to improve volunteer satisfaction and therefore retention). Indeed, some volunteer representatives directly critiqued what they saw as a management overemphasis on recruitment to the detriment of retention.

Expectation-Capacity Gap

The third problem frame, Expectations-Capacity Gap sees the core problem as a widening gap between rising political, social and organisational expectations of volunteer-based services in emergency management and declining or inadequate resourcing and support to build capacity to meet these rising expectations. This gap leaves volunteers and organisations struggling with high workloads, rising numbers of callouts (emergency services) and declining service quality, most noticeably in rural areas that have smaller volunteer bases. This frame was evident across all the stakeholder groups; however, it was moderately present among managers of emergency service volunteerism, and strongly present amongst the other groups.

There were also differences in the kinds of capacity gaps described. Emergency service volunteer representatives emphasised shortfalls in organisational capacity to lead, manage, engage, equip and otherwise support volunteers. Meanwhile, representatives from non-government organisations, volunteering peak bodies and local government emphasised a lack of access to funding, particularly prior to emergency events occurring, as well as shortages in human resources and organisational planning, and a lack of recognition for the contribution of the community sector and community development to emergency management and community resilience goals:

There is no recognition in the formal arrangements as they currently stand for spontaneous volunteers, local community groups, local community sector organisations and so on. [...] there is no recognition or resources to 'support the supporters' - and this inevitably takes a toll on the individuals and organisations involved.

Community sector representative

There are three key priority action areas associated with this frame that were highlighted by participants. First, involving a wider range of emergency management stakeholders in planning, including community sector organisations both large and small. Second, reviewing and redesigning formal emergency management funding arrangements to be more equitable and inclusive, recognising contributions from a wider range of organisations and volunteers. Third, building greater community-wide capacity for emergency management through access to training and other capacity-building programs.

Culture Clash

The Culture Clash frame, while not the most prominent in participant responses, was commonly portrayed as underlying and exacerbating

the problems highlighted under the other three frames as well as presenting a problem in itself. According to this frame, command-and-control culture and structures, and traditionalistic attitudes in the emergency management sector are persistent barriers to the innovation, collaboration and adaptive capacity needed to respond to the shifting landscape of volunteering:

I think entrenched attitudes, vested interests and an 'old guard' unwilling to innovate are the greatest challenges to this [emergency management] sector at present.

Community sector representative

[The key challenge around volunteer sustainability is] culture; changing the emergency service organisation culture to be inclusive and collaborative [...] some of this stuff around that cultural arrogance.

Manager in emergency service volunteerism

Key symptoms of this problem described across the different stakeholder groups were resistance to change, insular decision-making, presence of siloes, risk aversion, poor youth engagement, failure to innovate, low volunteer diversity, and persistence of out-of-date models and practices. A symptom shared between this and the Professionalisation problem is a widening gap between the goals, values and practices of bureaucratic, and increasingly corporatised and professionalised, emergency management organisations on one hand, and the more community-centric values and motivations of volunteers and communities:

Whilst it used to feel like you worked for the community wearing [an organisational] uniform and doing what the community needed, it now feels like you wear a uniform and do the work of the [organisation].

Emergency service volunteer representative

I believe it is highly likely that communities may start to self-organise and once again create their own response capacity outside of the corporate brand. [...] Self-organised through social media, it is likely that communities will say "enough of your crap!! We want a local brigade that can respond when we need, and for the reasons we need it.

Emergency service volunteer representative

Solutions for addressing the Culture Clash problem were harder for participants to articulate and were more often implied than directly described. Careful, active and purposeful change management at organisational levels to bring people along with the shifts needed to adapt to the changing external environment was raised. So too was the need to continue and deepen the sector's growing focus on improving diversity and inclusion in emergency management.

A key aspect of change management that will need close attention is to manage impacts of change on organisational and volunteer values so as not to further widen the gap described above. As Calcutt (2019) shows in a recent study of values motivating emergency service volunteers, "values are powerful motivators, and shared values can reinforce volunteer commitment and retention, while conflicting values can contribute to volunteer turnover. Satisfying and managing the different values needs of an increasingly diverse volunteer workforce will require a more nuanced and responsive approach, with a greater emphasis on building an organisational culture founded on the values of encouragement, respect and inclusion" (p.2, abstract).

Frame reflexive learning and practice for emergency volunteering

The underlying purpose of this paper was to support greater engagement in frame reflexive learning and practice (Schön & Rein 1994) that can enable adaptive planning for the future of emergency volunteering. Frame reflexive learning and practice involves relevant actors collectively, systematically and directly exploring different framings of core problems and their solutions (e.g. "what's wrong and what needs fixing", see Schön & Rein 1994, pp. 24-26). This paper contributes to this primarily by articulating the different ways that 'what's wrong and what needs fixing' is framed among a range of emergency volunteering stakeholder groups. Bosomworth and colleagues have studied the need and potential for frame reflexive learning and practice in Australian emergency management and climate change policy (Bosomworth 2015; Bosomworth et al. 2017). As she explains, "an exploration of different framings of a sector's policy 'fundamental problem' could reveal a greater array of policy options than currently considered, and thereby present more robust, adaptive policy suites" (Bosomworth 2015, p. 1452).

Certainly, articulating frames alone is not enough. Processes and forums through which these frames can be explored, and their implications robustly examined are needed. Deep and wide collaboration is a necessary condition for frame reflexive practice through bringing together a wider range of stakeholders with different ways of framing the same policy issue. Bosomworth et al. (2017, p. 318) identify how collaborative or networked governance "could help strategic-level emergency management overcome a tendency to react within narrow frames of problem-solving, and to challenge the traditional occupational identity of reactive 'command and control'".

In the context of emergency volunteering, participants in this research across all the stakeholder groups recognised a shift in the sector towards greater collaboration - including with actors from within as well as beyond the sector. However, they also conveyed that the sector still has a long way to go to achieve the deeper and wider collaboration in planning and

governance that many participants posited is a core element for a preferred future for emergency volunteering. This was especially emphasised by participants from local-level community-based and community led groups:

We continue to advocate with the authorities and agencies for improved awareness by them of the potential benefits from engaging community-based organisations. This requires that they learn to trust us to know what is best for our community.

Community sector representative

On ongoing barrier to collaboration and frame reflexive learning and practice is the tendency for emergency volunteering problems and solutions to be framed, discussed and acted on primarily at the level of organisations in the context of workforce planning, and volunteer recruitment and retention programming. While these are indeed important areas of planning and action for volunteer sustainability, by comparison there is relatively little action at the more strategic, sector-wide level. While wider forums do exist for organisations to share learning and discuss shared challenges, e.g. Australian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council (AFAC) and the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum (AEMVF), these still have relatively narrow membership and remain focused on organisational challenges and initiatives.

A key development that could enable frame reflexive learning and practice is therefore creation of new and more open, inclusive forums within which emergency volunteering issues that transcend organisational boundaries, such as the coordination of spontaneous volunteering and reviews of funding arrangements, can be collaboratively explored, while also remaining centred on community needs, risk and values:

Something that brings the leadership of all the emergency management services together and focuses on the community and supporting each other in the betterment of the community is what is needed. [...] How do we develop leadership across all those agencies to focus on the communities and therefore focus on the volunteers [...]?

Manager in emergency service volunteerism

As this quote highlights, a key, unresolved issue is from where leadership and, indeed, responsibility for mobilising collaborative action on boundary-spanning issues. Without this, the same volunteering issues that were being highlighted and discussed twenty years ago, may well remain unresolved and even further entrenched in another twenty years' time.

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