December 2019

Emergency service volunteering: Current & future challenges[1]

Introduction

My article in *Nexus* (Vol 29, No. 2) in August 2017 foreshadowed research being undertaken under the auspices of the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre (BNHCRC) and the University of Wollongong that was examining the contemporary forces impacting on the resourcing of the emergency service volunteer workforce in Australia. This article summarises the key findings of a Master thesis titled "Valuing volunteers: better understanding the primary motives for volunteering in Australian emergency services" that is available at https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses1/558/. The Valuing Volunteers study provides new insights on the motives for formal emergency service volunteering through empirical research on volunteers' shared and contrasting values, and critically evaluates the broader policy and social contexts for such important and essential civic participation.

Emergency services are responsible for the protection and preservation of life and property from harm resulting from emergency events, and include the fire service organisations, ambulance service organisations, State emergency services, marine rescue and coast guard organisations, and lifesaving organisations. Volunteers are the lifeblood of emergency services in Australia and are integral to the nation's emergency management capabilities and overall disaster resilience. The concurrence of an increase in the risks posed by a range of climate change-related natural hazards and a decline in formal volunteering rates threatens Australia's emergency preparedness.

The study explores five key research objectives:
• Demonstrate that emergency service volunteering represents exceptional civic participation
• Establish the validity and utility of a values framework for interpreting and understanding the primary motives for emergency service volunteering
• Determine the distinct shared and contrasting values of a sample of emergency service volunteers
• Evaluate the efficacy and integrity of current processes for determining national emergency management priorities
• Identify trends in changing core values with implications for future forms of civic participation, including emergency service volunteering.

---

[1] Original article available at:
https://www.tasa.org.au/content.aspx?page_id=722&club_id=671860&emtid=128169350910&mtid=489296922936&ht=1&sl=1506723029

Research findings

In respect to the first research objective, the study identifies the unique circumstances and distinctive characteristics of emergency service volunteering that justify its description as exceptional civic participation. These include: the physically and psychologically demanding nature of emergency response roles; the level of dedication and personal commitment required to sustain emergency service volunteering; the specialist competencies required to undertake emergency tasks safely; and the social and economic value to the community of the unpaid services provided by volunteers. The research highlights that the goodwill required to sustain volunteer commitment can be fragile and is easily exhausted, particularly when motivating values are not satisfied or are challenged.

In respect to the second research objective on the validity and utility of a values framework, the study demonstrates the efficacy of a values construct as a comprehensive, multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary theoretical framework for interpreting and understanding diverse individual and social behaviours. The study finds that values are powerful motivators, with shared core values reinforcing volunteer commitment and retention, and conflicting and amorphous values contributing to volunteer turnover. Volunteering is a cultural phenomenon that reflects the community's attitudes towards duty, civic responsibility and concern for the welfare of others (altruism).

The study utilised the Schwartz Theory of Basic Human Values as a theoretical framework to highlight congruities and conflicts between ten basic and four higher-order values across two bipolar dimensions. Schwartz (2005, p.1) defines values as "desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in people's lives", and has been instrumental in the development of an integrated values framework that has been widely applied and extensively evaluated across multiple organisational and national settings over two decades. The Schwartz values framework had particular relevance to this study as the bipolar higher-order dimensions (self-transcendence versus self-enhancement and conservation versus openness to change) largely align with the major trends currently impacting emergency service volunteering in Australia (declining altruism and pressures for corporatisation).

The third research objective necessitated the empirical examination of the values preferences of the NSW State Emergency Service volunteer workforce through the utilisation of the Schwartz Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ-40) survey, ultimately attracting 522 respondents. The survey revealed statistically significant differences in values preferences by gender and generation, with female volunteers expressing a clear preference for the higher-order value of self-transcendence (altruism), and males and younger (Gen Y) volunteers expressing a clear preference for the contradictory higher-order value of self-enhancement (egoism).

The fourth research objective critically evaluates Australia's national all-hazards risk management policy that commits to determine national emergency management priorities on the basis of evidence and objective analysis of relative risk, not emotion or ideology. The study finds that despite the established risks and demonstrated harms (including significant mortality) posed by a range of hazards (including natural hazards), Australia's national emergency management priorities are dominated and distorted by fear-based perceptions of terrorism. A terrorism connotation distorts all that it touches, removing any sense of proportion or objective perspective on relative risk, and reinforcing a community-wide phobia and sense of insecurity. As a result, inestimable public resources are dedicated to counter-terrorism (where the harms in terms of mortality are relatively limited and/or amorphous), while the task of

defending communities from the devastating effects of natural hazards (where the harms in terms of mortality are clear and have been severe) is devolved to unpaid and under-resourced emergency service volunteers.

The fifth research objective examines trends in evolving community values in Australia, finding that technology is facilitating fundamental changes in shared core values and social norms, leading to a rise in individualism and growing social atomisation. A community-wide decline in altruistic values and changes in the nature of civic participation are reflected in ABS data on the level of formal volunteering in Australia, with a drop from 34% in 2010 to 31% in 2014. The research notes that Australia may be particularly susceptible to volatile values due to the absence of an established and consistent national values framework (in a Constitution or Charter), and deficits in principles, ethics and humanity are apparent in many aspects of Australian society.

Implications

The implications of these findings for emergency service volunteering in Australia are significant. A decline in altruistic values is already making the recruitment and retention of formal (committed) volunteers challenging, with the potential that in the future it may be more difficult to mobilise and sustain an adequate skilled volunteer workforce in the face of a large-scale or protracted emergency event. The research highlights the critical role of organisational culture, in particular the importance of shared core values, in sustaining volunteer commitment and retention. Shared core values can be the "glue" that keeps people together for a common social purpose. This means that agencies are faced with critical choices about clearly defining their core values, and the nature of the work culture that they are seeking to engender. Given that thousands of (partly autonomous) emergency service units are scattered across Australia, each with its own unique culture, developing and sustaining a consistent organisational culture may pose particular challenges.

The research also reveals the presence of divergent and potentially conflicting values preferences within the existing volunteer workforce (by gender and generation), raising the possibility that incongruous or unsatisfied values may be contributing to volunteer turnover. It may be difficult to sustain a culture that accommodates and meets the needs of both altruistic and egoistic values, and agencies may be forced to decide where they can source sufficient numbers of suitable candidates and tailor their marketing accordingly. This could, for example, mean emphasising the altruistic and intrinsic (community benefit) dimensions of emergency service volunteering, with recruitment mainly targeting females and older volunteers who share these values. Alternatively, marketing could emphasise the egoistic and extrinsic dimensions of emergency service volunteering (how it meets individual and personal needs), with recruitment mainly targeting males and younger volunteers who share these values.

Whatever values choices emergency services make, satisfying and managing the different values needs of an increasingly diverse emergency service volunteer workforce will require a more nuanced approach that emphasises the values of encouragement, respect, inclusion, competency and integrity.

Bill Calcutt PSM
wgc447@uowmail.edu.au
November 2019