



Spontaneous Volunteering During Natural Disasters

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Recent natural disasters across Australia have stimulated an outpouring of spontaneous volunteering, both formally through nonprofit and government agencies and informally through local community and online networks. Relatively little is understood about who spontaneously volunteers and, if so, how volunteers remain engaged beyond the initial disaster event. This study:

- examined the characteristics, motivations and networks of spontaneous volunteers who responded to the 2010-11 Queensland flood and cyclone crises;
- considered the effects of spontaneous volunteering on personal, social and civic networks;

- shed light on the conditions under which sustained volunteering and other forms of civic engagement arise from spontaneous volunteering and;
- considered the practical implications of these findings for organisations involved in coordinating volunteers both with and beyond disaster events.

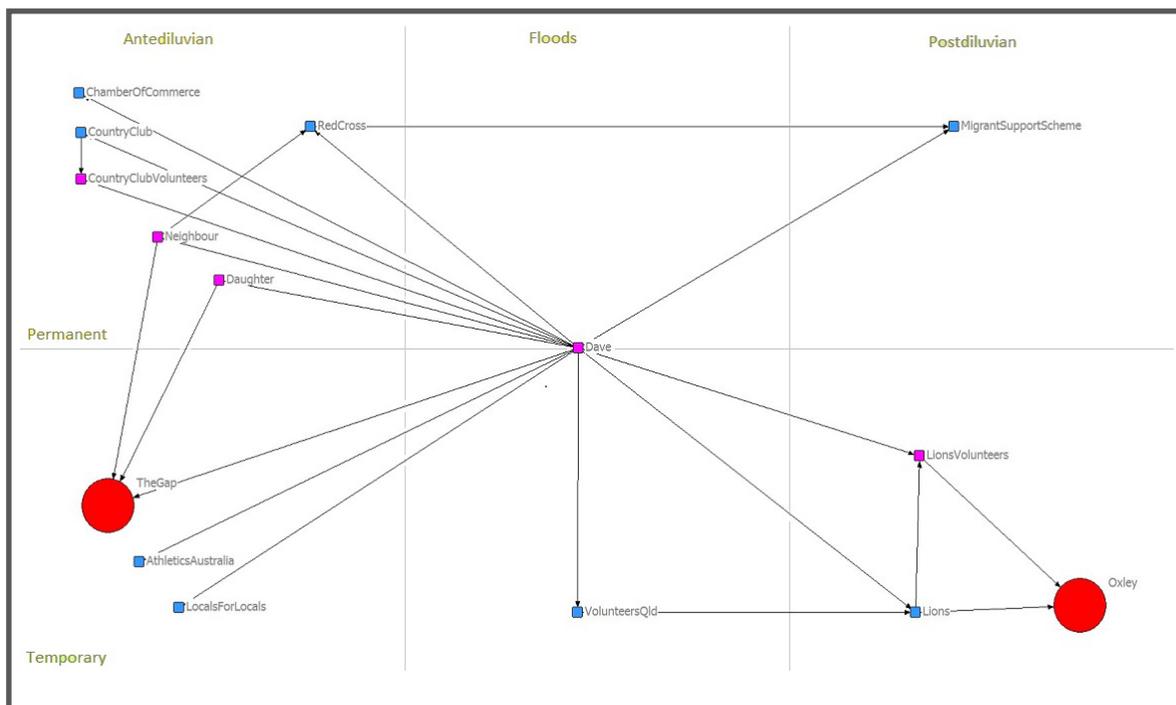
The research was based on a mixed methods study of spontaneous volunteers involving surveys (N=712), semi-structured interviews (N=11) and network mapping of individual experiences (N=4).

Our research found that, while the majority of spontaneous volunteers were volunteering for the first time, those with past experience of volunteering were

likely to volunteer for longer during the disaster response and more likely to sustain their volunteering activities after the event.

The findings emphasised the importance of spontaneous volunteers' relationships — including their relationships to people and place — in motivating them to volunteer. Network analysis found that different kinds of network brokers play different roles in facilitating spontaneous volunteering. Individuals were important in brokering people's initial contact with volunteering opportunities, and organisations played a greater role in translating emergent volunteer responses to sustained civic engagement.

An example of respondents' networks in relation to their disaster volunteering activity





Findings suggest that individuals with an existing predisposition for volunteering their services and time will find ways to participate. However, the quality and accessibility of services responsible for coordinating volunteering are vitally important in ensuring continued participation beyond the timeframe of the catalysing event.

The research also indicated that volunteering plays an important psycho-social role in individual and collective resilience during and after natural disasters. Both our quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that, for many people, helping (or offering to help) the community is an important factor in regulating their personal stress and anxiety associated with the disaster event.

Our research findings propose that much of the motivation and many of the opportunities to engage meaningfully in spontaneous volunteering are outside the remit of institutions or organisations. However, the findings point to a number of practical implications for public policy and volunteer management:

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The power of asking

The results from this research send a loud message that the way in which people are asked to participate has a powerful effect on their actions with regard to volunteering. The most powerful 'askers' that emerged from this study were: people who were personally or professionally close to potential volunteers; governmental and nonprofit institutions that were recognised as 'being in charge'; individual political leaders who were viewed as 'being in charge'; and professional associations and institutions with expertise and existing networks needed to broker skilled volunteer responses. These findings suggest that improved identification of (different types of) network brokers, and targeted marketing and messaging of requests for volunteer contributions are important in both mobilising and managing effective volunteer efforts in response to disasters, and in ensuring sustained engagement of emergent volunteers beyond the crisis period.



The effects of past experience

In this study, people's past experiences, both of disasters and volunteering, motivated their initial and sustained involvement in volunteer efforts in different ways. In terms of sustaining people's involvements in volunteer efforts beyond the immediate aftermath of a disaster, and/or redirecting volunteer efforts to longer term forms of civic engagement, our study suggests that it might be important for volunteer and government agencies to distinguish 'emergent' spontaneous volunteers from 'experienced' spontaneous volunteers. While the latter group requires less targeted support to remain involved, more tailored responses that take into account individual needs are required to ensure that the former group engage and remain engaged, if this is a goal. Our research also suggests that there are a great many latent networks present in communities that may be relatively easily mobilised in response to certain needs or events. Over-utilising these networks is not advisable, but it may be useful to periodically check in on volunteers to make sure that they are still there and connected and that their 'connectors' are also still in place and able to mobilise.

The therapeutic effects of spontaneous volunteering

Similarly to other studies, our research suggests that the act of volunteering can have important therapeutic effects for people directly and indirectly affected by crisis events. Yet, like any unguided therapeutic process, its effects on individuals are likely to be inconsistent. Better understanding these effects — through targeted research and through dialogue between professionals and organisations with relevant expertise in mental health and volunteer coordination — is important both to effective volunteer management and to population health and health promotion in the aftermath of natural disasters. Recognising that an offer to help is sometimes a cry for help is important in ensuring that appropriate referral systems and service coordination are in place during and after these events.

The power of storytelling

Our findings suggest that stories — conveyed through personal relationships, mainstream and social networking media — are powerful motivators for spontaneous volunteering and important mechanisms by which healing associated with collective volunteerism is facilitated. While the stories of recovery from the 2010-2011 Queensland flood and cyclone crises are still unfolding, more could be done to share these stories, and to link these stories with the wider communities affected by these and future disasters.

Greater recognition of these factors could enhance the work of organisations that are involved in volunteer coordination, public health and health promotion aimed at community resilience.

The full research report is available at:
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/61606/>

