

At the external boundary of a disaster response operation: The dynamics of volunteer inclusion

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In the present article, practices of inclusion of different types of volunteers in the response to a large-scale forest fire in Sweden are studied. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three types of voluntary actors. The volunteers were organized to different degrees, from members of organizations and participants in emergent groups to organizationally unaffiliated individuals. Organized volunteers were the most easily included, particularly if they were members of voluntary emergency organizations. It was difficult for volunteers lacking relevant organizational affiliation to be included. Disaster response operations are dynamic, conditions change over time, and tensions between different modes, degrees, and levels of inclusion may arise. However, irrespective of changing conditions, practices of inclusion of highly organized volunteers work best.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The convergence (i.e., gathering at the incident site) of volunteers in times of disaster has been observed by American researchers since the mid-1950s (Fritz & Mathewson, 1957) and is still very much present in disaster studies. For example, convergence has been observed and reported during both 9/11 (Kendra, Wachtendorf, & Quarantelli, 2003) and Hurricane Katrina (Rodriguez, Trainor, & Quarantelli, 2006).

When convergence of volunteers is discussed, references are mostly to organizationally unaffiliated individuals who offer their assistance in times of disaster. Such individual volunteers are often the actual first responders (Helsloot & Ruitenbergh, 2004; Kvarnlöf, 2015; Scanlon, Helsloot, & Groenendaal, 2014; Voorhees, 2008). They sometimes make a significant contribution to the response operation and have been described as “filling a void” when demands are not met by established emergency response organizations (Neal & Phillips, 1995; see also Drabek & McEntire, 2003). However, unaffiliated individuals may also cause trouble (e.g., because they cause logistical problems or because they lack required skills), and they tend to be regarded as a “mixed blessing” by professional emergency

responders (Barsky, Trainor, Torres, & Aguirre, 2007; Harris, Shaw, Scully, Smith, & Hieke, 2017).

However, a disaster response operation usually also consists of other kinds of voluntary actors than individual unaffiliated volunteers. These may include a sometimes rather messy mix of voluntary organizations, other professional organizations temporarily activated on a voluntary basis, emergent groups, and unaffiliated individuals (Moynihan, 2009). Two factors contribute to this messiness. First, disaster response operations often have an official part, which may be regarded as a workplace (Kvarnlöf & Johansson, 2014), and a more unofficial part, consisting of emergent activities (Majchrzak, Jarvenpaa, & Hollingshead, 2007). Second, volunteers may be present at both the official and unofficial parts of the response operation (Harris et al., 2017).

The external boundary of the official disaster response operation, separating it from unofficial emergent activities, is often permeable; volunteers may pass in and out through the boundary, but they may also be prevented from doing so (Barsky et al., 2007). In the present article, the passing, and failure to pass, of three types of volunteers through the external boundary of an official disaster response operation will be studied. The three types of voluntary actors studied are

(i) organized volunteers, (ii) participants in emergent groups, and (iii) individual unaffiliated volunteers.

More precisely, the aim of the article is to study, from the volunteers' perspective,¹ how various voluntary actors are included in the official disaster response operation. The following research questions are in focus. Who is allowed to be involved in the official response operation? What boundary practices do volunteers apply in order to be included? In what ways and to what degrees are different types of volunteers included? The inclusion of volunteers in official disaster response operations is a complex phenomenon, and the dynamic character of disasters adds to the complexity as conditions may change during the response and patterns of inclusion may change accordingly.

The detailed study of the practices of inclusion of volunteers in a disaster response operation, from the perspective of the volunteers themselves, is the main contribution of this study. As the perspective of volunteers is seldom taken into account in disaster research, this study will increase the knowledge of volunteerism in disaster response generally. The study identifies areas where current practices for inclusion of different types of volunteers work well, and where they do not work well, and may therefore be of practical value for emergency management. Contemporary changing patterns of civic commitment, from organized to episodic volunteering, with short-term commitment to a specific issue or event rather than long-term commitment to an organization, make adaptation of the practices of inclusion of volunteers imperative for the civil protection and preparedness sector.

2 | BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OVERVIEW

2.1 | The object of study: A response operation to a forest fire

Empirically, the article is based on a large-scale forest fire that broke out in the Swedish province of Västmanland on Thursday, 31 July 2014. The alarm call was received Thursday afternoon, and initially, two separate response operations (by two municipalities affected by the fire) were initiated. During the first couple of days, the fire was not considered an extraordinary event. However, the fire spread quickly and developed into the largest Swedish forest fire in modern times. On Tuesday of the following week, the region's county administrative board took over responsibility for the response operation from the municipalities, and a more unified operation under a single incident commander was established (Asp et al., 2015).

Some volunteers, mainly farmers from the community, were present from the outset, using their agricultural equipment to fight the fire and working parallel to, rather than together with, the official response operation. During the third day of the fire, professional responders requested assistance from some voluntary emergency organizations forming part of the official Swedish system for civil protection and preparedness (e.g., Voluntary Resource Groups [VRG], established as a resource for Swedish municipalities, and the Home Guard, which is a volunteer-based branch of the Swedish

armed forces). As time went by, a large number of volunteers, organized as well as unaffiliated, became involved in the response operation. Some of the volunteers remained active in the operation for more than 2 weeks.

2.2 | Research overview

Much of the research on volunteers gathering at disaster sites has focused mainly on individual unaffiliated volunteers (Barsky et al., 2007; Harris et al., 2017; Helsloot & Ruitenbergh, 2004; Kvarnlöf & Johansson, 2014; Scanlon et al., 2014). However, when individuals converge, they may begin to organize their work in one way or another, thereby creating emergent groups. In one of the first articles to cover this phenomenon, Stallings and Quarantelli (1985: 84) defined emergent groups as "private citizens who work together in pursuit of collective goals relevant to actual or potential disasters but whose organization has not yet become institutionalized." Here, "emergent" refers to the newness, absence of formalization and lack of tradition that characterize this kind of group. Recently, however, this view of emergence as a context-free phenomenon has been criticized as emergent phenomena occur in specific social settings and can be properly understood only in relation to a social context (Harris et al., 2017; Kvarnlöf, 2016).

However, disasters can also be studied from a more formal organizational perspective. Studies of established voluntary organizations during disaster response operations have been conducted primarily, but not exclusively (Lundberg, Törnqvist, & Nadjm-Tehrani, 2014), in countries where large-scale disasters are frequent (i.e., in the United States, Australia, Japan, and a number of other, mostly less developed, countries). These studies show, *inter alia*, that for collaboration between voluntary organizations and professional response organizations to work well, the voluntary organizations must be well established and legitimate (Luna, 2002).

However, not all organized volunteer activity during disaster response operations occurs through voluntary organizations. Extending organizations (Dynes, 1970), that is, organizations such as firms that do not normally perform voluntary work but temporarily and voluntarily put their knowledge, skills, and equipment at the disposal of emergency responders, often make significant contributions in times of disaster (Kendra et al., 2003; Majchrzak et al., 2007).

Thus, there is no shortage of research regarding volunteerism during disaster response operations. However, to our knowledge, few studies (see, however, Harris et al., 2017) have examined exactly how different kinds of volunteers are actually included in official disaster response operations.

3 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 | Categories of volunteers

This study takes an organizational perspective on volunteering. Our categorization of three different types of volunteers has different degrees of organization as its point of departure: (i) organized

volunteers, (ii) participants in emergent groups, and (iii) individual unaffiliated volunteers.

An important distinction between different kinds of *organized volunteers* is based on the kind of organization they represent. We distinguish between voluntary emergency organizations and extending organizations (cf. Dynes, 1970).

Voluntary emergency organizations have emergency response as part of their core activities. They exist, at least partly, to assist professional responders when an emergency occurs, and many of them are part of the official national system of civil protection and preparedness. Examples include the Home Guard, which is a volunteer-based branch of the Swedish armed forces, and the VRG that are organized in slightly less than half of Swedish municipalities.

Extending organizations are normally not voluntary organizations. This category consists of other kinds of organizations that temporarily and voluntarily perform new tasks but otherwise work within their well-known structure. This may occur as part of disaster response situations, such as when different kinds of vessels were used, temporarily and voluntarily, to evacuate the urban areas affected by Hurricane Katrina (Majchrzak et al., 2007) and Lower Manhattan after the September 11 attacks (Kendra et al., 2003).

Turning to unaffiliated volunteers, *emergent groups* can be conceptualized as groups that deal with new tasks within a new organizational structure (Dynes's, 1970). The basis for the formation of an emergent group is a number of people being in the same place—an emergency site—at the same time, sharing a situation, and taking some kind of common action. Recently, a new kind of emergent group has become more common, namely digital emergent groups (Umihara & Nishikitani, 2013; Whittaker, McLennan, & Handmer, 2015), such as Facebook groups created for the collection or coordination of resources to deal with an emergency.

Finally, *unaffiliated individual volunteers* lack a relevant (for the response operation) organizational affiliation. They are “individual” in the sense that they are not involved in any kind of emergent common action. An individual voluntary act may be, for example, registering as a volunteer at a website or, at one's own initiative, single-handedly digging a firebreak. Unaffiliated individuals may differ in several respects, some of which involve individual traits, such as the relevant skills and resources they may or may not have.

Different types of volunteers have varying degrees of legitimacy. Previous research has found that different volunteers are treated differently depending on their perceived (by the professionals) legitimacy and usefulness (Barsky et al., 2007; Harris et al., 2017). Being a member of an established organization is a source of legitimacy, and unaffiliated volunteers largely lack legitimacy vis-à-vis professional emergency responders (Kvarnlöf, 2015; Lorenz, Schulze, & Voss, 2017).

An official disaster response operation is “official” in the sense that it is part of the national system for civil protection and preparedness. It has a clear organizational structure, is governed by laws

and regulations, and takes the form of a workplace, where a number of different actors collaborate in order to respond to the challenges caused by the disaster (Kvarnlöf & Johansson, 2014). To be included in an official operation means to be accepted as a legitimate *member* of the workplace. Being a member means that someone has made a decision to accept a person as a member (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Some members of the workplace are volunteers. It is possible, however, to make a contribution to the response operation without being a member of the workplace. The response operation consists not only of an official part but also of an unofficial part, summarized here as “emergent activities,” where volunteers are *participants* rather than members. It does not require a formal decision to participate in the emergent activities.

3.2 | Dimensions of boundary practices

Unlike most other workplaces, an official disaster response operation does not have a “fixed” permanent physical location. Rather, it is constructed anew each time a disaster strikes. However, unlike most other temporary organizations (Bakker, 2010), one does not know exactly *when* a disaster will occur. The unknown time frame makes official disaster response operations characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. To decrease uncertainty, various types of *boundary practices* are employed by the “insiders,” who want to control who is actually involved in the operation, but also by the “outsiders,” who want to be let in. The latter practices, performed by (prospective) volunteers, are in focus here.

Boundary practices are applied to distinguish different groups of people from one another (Kvarnlöf & Johansson, 2014). In the present article, boundary practices will be studied from the volunteers' perspective. The analytical model below is based mainly on our own empirical data. We view inclusion as a dynamic phenomenon. It can be considered from two points of view: the *context* and the *form* of inclusion. These can vary along four different dimensions. The contextual dimensions consist of (i) the *effort* required from the volunteers and (ii) the *level* at which volunteers are included. For the form of inclusion, (iii) the *mode* and (iv) the *degree* of inclusion are considered (Table 1).

Different practices may require more or less effort from the volunteers. We therefore make a distinction between *passive* inclusion, where little activity is required of volunteers, and *active* inclusion, where some kind of initiative by the volunteers is necessary for them to be included. Inclusion may also occur at different levels; some volunteers are included at an *operative* level, whereas others

TABLE 1 Dynamics of inclusion

Point of view	Dimensions	Variations		
Context	Effort	Passive	Active	
	Level	Operative	Managerial	
Form	Mode	Social	Spatial	Symbolic
	Degree	Complete	Partial	Minimal

are singled out for more *managerial* positions. Regarding form, there are different modes of inclusion. In our empirical data, we have found three such modes: *social* inclusion in a workplace means being regarded as a member of a group and being given a task; *spatial* inclusion means having an actual place to perform one's task; and *symbolic* inclusion consists of signs of involvement. These different modes of inclusion may appear in different combinations. Inclusion may vary in degree from *minimal* to *partial* to *complete* inclusion. When inclusion is minimal, it is merely symbolic. Inclusion is complete when all modes of inclusion (social, spatial, and symbolic) are involved.

The dynamics of inclusion consist of variations on these four dimensions. They may vary independently of each other, and variation may occur in terms of combinations of, as well as tensions between, different dimensions of inclusion. Thus, development over time may lead to changes in the effort required from volunteers to be included and in the degree as well as the modes and levels of inclusion.

4 | METHOD

We base this research on retrospective interviews. The collection of empirical data began more than a year after the fire. To uncover the various boundary practices applied by different actors, semi-structured interviews were undertaken covering the practices used by the volunteers and their experiences of processes of inclusion more generally.

4.1 | Selection

Three different types of volunteers were interviewed: organized volunteers (i.e., members of voluntary emergency organizations and extending organizations), individual unaffiliated volunteers, and participants in emergent groups.

The organized informants were selected via their respective organizations and, in part, through a snowballing technique: we asked an interviewee to suggest another person to interview. Snowballing is a way of finding people in a difficult-to-reach population (Berg, 2007). Regarding organized volunteers, snowballing was used to ensure that we reached interviewees who were actually active during the response. In our search for unaffiliated volunteers, both individuals and members of emergent groups, we asked the organized volunteers to suggest unaffiliated volunteers who had been highly involved in the response operation. Thereafter, unaffiliated interviewees were asked to suggest other unaffiliated volunteers. Snowballing is a particularly appropriate sampling strategy to reach unaffiliated volunteers; they are otherwise simply too difficult to find. Members of digital emergent groups were found by searching the Internet.

A total of 31 respondents were interviewed: 16 organized volunteers and 15 unaffiliated volunteers. Twenty-one interviews were conducted with individuals, and five were group interviews (two persons per group). Each of the five groups consisted of people who

knew each other closely (married couples or friends) and worked together as volunteers. The groups were not focus groups as we did not specifically use group interaction as data. Rather, we expected two people who had worked together as volunteers to give a richer account of their experiences when interviewed together than if we had interviewed them individually (Berg, 2007).

With one exception (due to practical circumstances), two researchers were present at all interviews.

All informants were voluntarily involved in the response operation.

4.2 | Procedure

The interviews were conducted in Swedish at the informant's choice of location. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min. They followed an interview guide that covered questions such as when and how they were involved, what they worked with during their involvement, and with whom, if anyone, they collaborated. Follow-up questions were asked for clarification.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The quotations in the text were translated by the first author. Sometimes additional information has been inserted in a quotation; such additions are in square brackets: [].

Henceforth, the respondents will be identified using the letter "I" followed by a number (e.g., "I5") for participants in individual interviews and "G" followed by two numbers (e.g., "G3.2") for participants in group interviews, where the first number denotes the group and the second denotes the group member.

4.3 | Analysis

The interviews were analysed using theory-driven thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), starting by coding the interviews from the concept of social boundary practices. Next, the codes were scrutinized for information about the way the informants described their involvement (or lack thereof) in the response operation. During the analysis, three themes emerged that define the dynamics of inclusion: waiting to be invited, taking action, and boundary spanning. The analysis also showed the tensions and dynamics in the degree of inclusion. The response operations were characterized by contingencies and uncertainty, which sometimes led to changes in volunteers' degree of inclusion. In this respect, we found that timing was important in relation to different modes of inclusion.

4.4 | Ethics

The interviewees received full information on the topic of the study. All interviews were carried out with informed consent. No sensitive questions were asked as we were aware of the possibility that our questions might revive traumatic memories for some participants. During the entire interview session, we made sure that the informants were comfortable with our questions. Our purpose was not to pry into their emotions about the rescue operation. Rather, it was to determine their practice.

5 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The boundary practices under consideration in the present study occur at the external boundary of an official disaster response operation and take the form of social interaction between “insiders” (members) and “outsiders” (often trying to become members) of the workplace. Some practices may seem to be more exclusive than inclusive, but outright rejection is seldom applied; thus, we prefer to discuss matters in terms of different modes and different degrees of inclusion. The practices are examined from the perspective of the volunteers. Different practices may require more or less effort from them. We therefore make a distinction between *passive* inclusion, where a minimum of action is required by the volunteers, and *active* inclusion, where some kind of initiative from the volunteers is necessary.

Below, the following practices are described, all from the volunteers' point of view: (i) (waiting) to be invited, (ii) (taking action) to be let in, and (iii) boundary spanning. However, boundary practices are complex and dynamic, and inclusion is not always a clear-cut phenomenon. Therefore, a subsection on dynamics and tensions is included in this section.

5.1 | (Waiting) to be invited: passive and complete inclusion

All prospective volunteers are outsiders with regard to the official response operation until someone makes a decision to let them in. Some of the volunteers—members of voluntary emergency organizations—did not have to be particularly active to make that happen. All they had to do to be let in as members of the official disaster response operation was to wait (and as the fire started in the middle of the Swedish vacation period, many had to interrupt their vacation). The emergency managers included the voluntary emergency organizations by requesting their services, and the volunteers themselves, in turn, were called out by their respective organizations and were thus completely included, socially, spatially, and symbolically.

Voluntary Resource Groups are voluntary emergency organizations created as a resource for Swedish municipalities in times of crisis. During the forest fire, the two municipalities responsible for the two initial response operations called out two such groups quite early. As explained by the commander of one of the VRGs (on vacation when he was called out),

A decision was made Saturday evening to demand help from VRG. They were to be called out on Sunday. . . On Sunday I got back to [the home city of the VRG]. I had called out the group; they were ready, and we gathered at the fire station. (14)

However, it took some time before the voluntary emergency organizations were called out, and until that actually happened, some members of these organizations considered themselves excluded.

They were not content merely to wait and became impatient when they were not called out quickly enough. A vice chairperson of an organization that provides personnel to the Home Guard gives the following account:

I was on parental leave. . . But my mobile phone was bombarded with questions from Home Guard members asking why the Home Guard had not yet been called out in Västmanland. The fire had been going on for two days. (12)

To be “called out” as a member of a voluntary emergency organization is, however, not really an order to report for duty. Participation is voluntary, and not all volunteers were impatient to be called out. The timing of the forest fire, in the middle of the major Swedish vacation period, probably exacerbated the situation. A VRG commander described the situation:

To begin with, only fifty percent show up when called out. Then more people may arrive during the following days. (14)

There are standard routines for the calling-out process of different voluntary emergency organizations. For example, each VRG is a resource for a specific municipality, and only that municipality can call out that specific group. Initially, this worked as expected, but when VRGs from more distant municipalities in other regions were involved, the rules for calling out were set aside. The boundary practices got out of hand, and control over the influx of VRG members was lost. According to a VRG commander, this resulted in too many volunteers arriving at the command centre area, and he discussed the matter with a VRG member:

They just sat there, doing nothing. Only a few could be put to work as staff assistants. Then I said to her, ‘They just sit here. We have to send them home, they are not of any use.’ So some of them were sent home. . . Often there were too many personnel there. (14)

The somewhat disorderly calling-out process of VRGs, at times leading to a surplus, rather than a lack of organized volunteers, was shown in a subsequent evaluation of the emergency response: 25 VRGs were involved in the emergency response operation, but only 16 of them were approved by their respective municipalities to participate (Asp et al., 2015).

5.2 | (Taking action) to be let in: active, partial and complete inclusion

For some volunteers, waiting was not enough to be included. Prospective volunteers who were not called out had to take some action of their own in order to be included in the response operation. To begin acting, these volunteers needed “a way in.” Therefore,

initially, social networks in the form of friends and acquaintances were important for the decision to try to get involved in the disaster response. Such contacts were important both for having someone to start working with and to get help to reach someone “in charge.” A manager of ICA, a Swedish grocery chain that came to play a major role in supplying provisions as well as other goods during the response operation, told her story:

So I call [another manager at ICA] and I say, ‘I have thought about the fire; shouldn’t we help?’ ‘Great, I was thinking the same this morning. Are you here?’ ‘No, I’m on vacation.’ ‘Can you come here [to the workplace]?’ ‘Of course I can!’ So I got dressed and off to work... Now, I have friends working at SOS Alarm [the Swedish telephone operator of 112 emergency calls], and on my way to work I had called her and said, ‘We are thinking of helping. Do you have any contacts, who shall I call?’ So I got a few telephone numbers. We started to call people then. (I10)

However, prospective volunteers were not included unconditionally. The more one had to offer in terms of valued knowledge, skills and resources, the easier it was to become accepted as a volunteer. Organizational affiliation functioned to a large extent as a proxy for available skills and resources. This meant that representatives of certain extending organizations, such as the owners of a restaurant, the owner of a firm of haulage contractors, and farmers, were readily let in. As stated by a restaurant owner,

I called the fire-brigade officer, who I know. I got some information... Then I told him that [his wife] had got the idea that we could help by cooking food. ‘Oh God, that would be great, because we have not had a single hot meal.’ They had been fighting the fire for three-four days. (G1.1)

A more common pattern, however, was not to contact the professional emergency responders themselves but rather to get in contact with voluntary emergency organizations, above all VRGs, when VRG members had themselves become insiders of the workplace.

The role of extending organizations in disaster response is not unknown in research. However, when this kind of organization is involved, the situation has often been described as chaotic and the operation unplanned and formally uncoordinated (Kendra et al., 2003; Majchrzak et al., 2007)—in the terms used in the present study, not belonging to the official response operation but rather to the emergent activities. The response to this major forest fire in Sweden shows that this is not necessarily always the case. Here, some of the extending organizations appear to have been well integrated in the official response operation.

However, the backing of an organization was almost a necessary condition for inclusion, and there were few exceptions to this rule. For individual unaffiliated volunteers, it was very difficult to be

accepted as members of the official response operation. For those few who actually succeeded, appearances were sometimes as important as actual resources. Some prospective unaffiliated individual volunteers somewhat overstated their skills and resources simply to be let in. Two friends, young men, had initially spent a day and a night at the volunteer centre (where prospective volunteers could register) and then some hours in the area around the command centre without being assigned a task. One of them said,

But at last, when we had spent 24 hours there, I felt, ‘Let’s go for it! We have to tell a fib or whatever it takes to be allowed to do something. Otherwise it is just unnecessary to be here.’ (G3.1)

Later, it turned out that these two young men had necessary skills: they coordinated the construction of an ICT infrastructure that was initially lacking in the command centre. Nevertheless, the difficulties these two unaffiliated volunteers encountered are an indication of the importance of organizational affiliation for members of the official response operation.

5.3 | Spanning the boundary: active and dynamic inclusion

The number of response activities taken as a whole was considerably larger than those taking place within the official response operation. Some people did not wait or did not care to be accepted as members of the official response operation. Instead, they started working as participants performing different kinds of unofficial and emergent activities, mostly of an operational rather than supporting type (Kolmodin, 2017), outside the external boundary of the official disaster response operation. Emergent activities as such are outside the scope of the present study.

However, the external boundary of the workplace was neither clear-cut nor impermeable. Transboundary movements occurred, sometimes resulting in connections between participants and members or even leading to a change in status from participant to member. The latter happened to some of the local farmers. They were involved at an early stage, from the day the fire began. They represent a kind of extending organization, with valuable resources such as tractors, forestry machines, chainsaws, and liquid manure-spreaders (used as powerful water-spreaders). They initially self-organized. However, when the chairperson of the local organization of the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF), who was also a local politician, took a coordinating role, the volunteer farmers gradually became included as members of the official response operation. As explained by the chairperson, who became involved on Sunday morning, the fourth day of the fire,

The volunteers I had an overview of were approximately 300 people. There were small groups at different places. Not well connected. Then I went in and took responsibility. Like helping and being a resource... I have a huge network. (I12)

When the local LRF chairperson took a coordinating role, the volunteer farmers became increasingly closely connected to the official response operation. The relation between the LRF and the official response operation gradually developed until the LRF became a member, with the chairperson having a seat in the command centre.

Another kind of emergent activity took place through “digital volunteerism” (Whittaker et al., 2015). A number of Facebook groups were started in connection with the forest fire. The initiator of one of these had quite close contact with the official response operation. When different items began arriving in response to their call through the Facebook group, she began distributing them. She gives this account of how she became a type of “semi-member” and not merely a participant:

I had already been talking to [the crisis manager in one of the affected municipalities], and he said it is needed up there. So he sent me to [the command centre area]. (I3)

Her insider contact partners were mostly VRGs. Initially, she simply tried to deliver what she had collected, but VRGs later placed more specific “orders” for articles that were needed. As stated by a VRG commander,

So we started to cooperate. VRG with these digital volunteer groups. So it was an operation on Facebook as well, parallel. (I4)

This particular digital volunteer acted as a boundary spanner, working from the outside as contact partner with the insiders, particularly VRGs. She was not really a member and was neither spatially nor symbolically included. Rather, she may be regarded as “semi-socially” included; although not a member, she collaborated with the insiders who gave her specific tasks. Thus, even non-members (i.e., participants) could be partially included in the official response operation.

Other volunteers remained outside the boundary and did not collaborate with the members of the official response operation but managed to obtain legitimacy from the insiders. A group of eight women initiated a volunteer centre where prospective volunteers could register, people could get information, and food was cooked and delivered. Before they began their work, however, they sought and received the approval of the incident commander of one of the municipalities involved. Thus, the connection with the official response operation was made from the outset. However, apart from this initial contact, it was very difficult for the people at the volunteer centre to reach the command centre:

[It was] incredibly frustrating. We knew there were lots of things on the other side [of the fire area] that we could not get to because we could not even reach them. (I17)

Thus, in some cases, the participants outside the boundary of the official response operation would have liked to have been more included and have more contact with the insiders.

5.4 | Dynamics and tensions

Inclusion is not always a clear-cut matter. Response operations are dynamic, conditions change over time, and tensions between different modes, degrees, and levels of inclusion may arise.

5.4.1 | Changing degrees, modes, and levels of inclusion

Members of voluntary emergency organizations were the most highly organized volunteers, and they clearly had the highest degree of legitimacy of all volunteers. They could therefore be passive and simply wait to be included by the professional emergency responders. These volunteers were completely included, socially, spatially, and symbolically. However, even this type of volunteer inclusion was not always unequivocal; inclusion is dynamic, and sometimes the tension between different degrees of inclusion was obvious.

Timing is important in relation to different modes and degrees of inclusion. During the first few days of the fire, no voluntary emergency organizations were included, making some volunteers impatient. Moreover, once they had been completely included, they were sometimes subjected to de-including² practices, such as being temporarily ignored. This occurred in disorderly situations; as a rule, emergency response is least organized at the outset (Steigenberger, 2016). A VRG commander describes such a situation during the initial phase of establishing a unified command centre:

But nothing much happened during Sunday. Many of the tasks were not assigned to us. It was because they were so overloaded, the operative leadership, they could not receive VRG... They were so overloaded, they could not coordinate their own resources; then a VRG arrived whom they do not really know but should set them to work. They didn't have time for that.

Thus, the VRG became temporarily de-included. From having been completely included, inclusion was reduced to spatial and symbolic inclusion, whereas social inclusion was lacking. However, soon thereafter, the VRG was again completely included and played an important role in the command centre area.

Individual members of voluntary emergency organizations could also be subject to outright exclusion, after having first been included, by being sent home again. This occurred for some VRG members because the routines for calling them out were set aside, resulting in a surplus of volunteers.

Volunteers could also be exposed to shifting levels of inclusion. The first VRG group to be called out had a seat in the original command centre of one of the municipal fire and rescue services. When

a unified command centre was established, the VRG initially did not get a seat there and was thereby de-included from the emergency command for almost a week. (They were still included in the official operation, but only at the operative level.) They then obtained a seat in the command centre, thereby becoming re-included at the managerial level.

Thus, even for the most highly organized volunteers, inclusion was not always unequivocal; changing conditions could lead to reorganization, resulting in changes in modes and degrees of inclusion, making it a truly dynamic phenomenon.

The same applies to less organized volunteers. The two young men mentioned above illustrate the dynamic character of inclusion. It took a long time for them to be included (they spent 24 hr at the volunteer centre and the command centre area with nothing to do). Eventually, they succeeded in talking their way into the response operation (where they coordinated the construction of an ICT infrastructure in the command centre). They went home after a few days, when they considered their task accomplished. However, they were later asked to return to the command centre to continue their work within the ICT environment. Thus, they went from non-inclusion to (active) inclusion to (voluntary) non-inclusion and back to (passive) inclusion.

Sometimes transboundary movements could lead to some degree of inclusion of participants. When the local chairperson of the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF) became involved in coordinating the emergent activities of the local farmers, the LRF eventually became a member organization of the official response operation, and the chairperson had a seat in the command centre. A large-scale evacuation of animals was entirely delegated to the LRF and to local farmers. Thus, when the emergent activities of local farmers were placed under the organizational umbrella of the LRF, inclusion in the official operation was facilitated.

The initiator of one of the Facebook groups, initially an outsider, was “semi-socially” included in the official operation; the VRG “insiders” gave her specific tasks by placing “orders” for needed items from the Facebook group.

5.4.2 | Symbolic inclusion as recognition and as illusion

Once a volunteer was accepted as a member of the official response operation, it was sometimes important to be recognized as such, particularly if that volunteer was deployed in a spatially bounded area with a clearly “members only” character. Members of voluntary emergency organizations usually wore particular clothing as symbols of inclusion. This could be an actual military uniform, worn by members of the Home Guard, or a uniform-like vest, such as the ones worn by VRG members.

However, the group of volunteers who had to take their own initiative to be included, mostly representing extending organizations in the command centre area, worked there without being members of a voluntary organization. For practical reasons, to be recognized as members, they were provided with VRG vests. They were allowed

to “strut in borrowed plumes,” so to speak, to increase their degree of inclusion by reinforcing their social and spatial inclusion with a symbolic one. For them, the vests were used to symbolize general inclusion in the official response operation rather than VRG membership (cf. Eliasson, 2010).

Sometimes, however, symbolic inclusion was also applied independently without any connection with social or spatial inclusion, thereby creating an illusion of involvement in the official response operation. Independent symbolic inclusion was, however, not used randomly for any groups of volunteers. Rather, it was specifically applied to individual unaffiliated volunteers. Two such practices, registration and referral, were applied in connection with the forest fire.

During the fire, people were given the opportunity to register as prospective volunteers. More than 700 persons contacted members of VRG and the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF) at a volunteer centre located in a village not far from the fire to register as volunteers or did so at a website run by one of the affected municipalities. It is not clear how many of these 700 individuals were actually used as volunteers in the response operation, but it was only a fraction of the people who registered (Asp et al., 2015). The local chairperson of the LRF gave an account of the situation at the volunteer centre:

We had our people [LRF members] at that centre in the middle of the village, receiving the people who called and said they could help or went there and said they could help. At the same time, we had a whole lot of people out already. So it was only a few of the people on the lists who actually came in [as actual members of the official response operation]. (I12)

When someone called directly to the command centre area, the organized volunteers tried to turn away unaffiliated volunteers, sometimes by referring prospective volunteers to the registration website. A VRG commander describes the strategy:

We said, ‘Thanks for your help; we suggest you contact [the volunteer registration website]. Do that, because right now we only take people with a proper VRG education, as a quality assurance measure.’ It worked fairly well. (I11)

The use of independent symbolic inclusion worked as a measure of minimal inclusion, providing the illusion of involvement in the official response operation but actually serving a kind of formal gate-keeping function. Previous research has shown that unaffiliated volunteers are often excluded (Barsky et al., 2007; Kvarnlöf & Johansson, 2014), and the construction of organized “access points” for volunteers has been recommended to facilitate the inclusion of volunteers (Moynihan, 2009). However, the use of minimal inclusion of unaffiliated volunteers in the response operation to the Swedish forest fire shows that organized access points for volunteers may actually work as a mechanism for exclusion in practice.

6 | CONCLUSION

The aim of the present article is to study how various voluntary actors are included in an official disaster response operation. The study shows that different boundary practices are employed depending on both volunteer characteristics and various contingencies. The most important volunteer trait is the *degree of organization*; the more organized, the more readily included. Organizational affiliation is the prime source of legitimacy for volunteers.

During the response operation for the Swedish forest fire, organizational affiliation as the prime source of legitimacy was crucial for volunteers in relation to all four dimensions of inclusion discussed above. The dimension of *effort* showed a clear connection with legitimacy. Only the volunteers with the highest degree of legitimacy—members of voluntary emergency organizations—were subject to passive inclusion; they were called out almost as a matter of routine. All other volunteers, particularly unaffiliated individuals, had to “prove their worth,” meaning that they were subject to active inclusion and their legitimacy was based on rational considerations. For the dimension of *levels*, it was clear that inclusion at the managerial level presupposed organizational affiliation. It was not necessary to be affiliated with a voluntary emergency organization, but other organizations, such as the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF), had to prove their worth before being included at the managerial level.

The two dimensions relating to the form of inclusion, *modes* and *degrees* of inclusion, were dependent on organizational affiliation. The calling-out process of the members of voluntary emergency organizations made them completely included, socially, spatially, and symbolically. Members of extending organizations sometimes had to “strut in borrowed plumes” (i.e., borrow signs of involvement, such as a VRG vest) to become not only socially and spatially but also symbolically included. Minimal inclusion through the use of independent symbolic inclusion was applied exclusively to unaffiliated individuals.

Organizational affiliation is of decisive importance for all dimensions of inclusion, and it is clear that some organizations are more legitimate than others. In Sweden, all official disaster response operations occur within the framework of a national system for civil protection and preparedness. This system constitutes a legal-structural context for each response operation (Sparf, 2014). Voluntary emergency organizations are part of the official national system. Therefore, their individual members are more similar to professional emergency responders than to other volunteers.

The inclusion of members of voluntary emergency organizations in the response operation to the Swedish forest fire seems to have worked fairly well, even if the calling-out process of VRG members temporarily got out of hand. The involvement of members of extending organizations was somewhat more complex, often demanding “a way in” for prospective volunteers in the form of a personal network. There is clearly room for improvement of the structures and routines for the inclusion of volunteers representing expanding organizations.

However, it is the model for the involvement of unaffiliated individuals that really needs improvement. In fact, there seemed to

be no such “model” at all during the forest fire. There were two places, a website and a volunteer centre, where unaffiliated individuals could register as prospective volunteers. The construction of such organized “access points” for volunteers has been recommended by researchers to facilitate the inclusion of volunteers (Moynihan, 2009). However, the present study shows that it is not sufficient to establish organized access points during a response operation. They must be planned, and the organizers must have some idea how to use the prospective volunteers once the volunteers have registered. Otherwise, as in the case of the Swedish forest fire, access points become reduced to mechanisms for minimal inclusion by means of independent symbolic inclusion (i.e., exclusion in practice).

Collaboration between unaffiliated and professional responders is rendered problematic for several reasons (Lorenz et al., 2017). In research on disaster management, there is a clear preference for the affiliation of unaffiliated volunteers with voluntary emergency organizations (Strandh & Eklund, 2017). At the same time, there is reason to believe that the role of unaffiliated volunteers will become more important in the future. In contemporary research on developments in civil society, it is often argued that, due to processes of individualization in late modernity, the character of volunteering is changing from organized to episodic volunteering, with short-term commitment to a specific issue or event rather than long-term commitment to an organization (Hustinx, 2010; McLennan, Whittaker, & Handmer, 2016).

The civil protection and preparedness sector needs to adapt its organizations to such changes, for example, by providing online platforms where citizens can register without being a member of an organization (Schmidt, Wolbers, Ferguson, & Boersma, 2017) or, more generally, by building structures of “networked governance” to include citizens (Waldman, Yumagulova, Mackwani, & Benson, 2017). To achieve this, citizens will most likely need to be involved before a crisis occurs, in the planning and preparation phase, in which they are currently largely absent.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Only the boundary practices are studied from the volunteers' perspective. The context consists of an official disaster response operation, which is described as precisely official, not from the point of view of the volunteers.
- ² De-including practices refer to situations when the degree of inclusion decreases without resulting in outright exclusion.

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