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incident sites as meeting places

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Introduction

Incident sites, e.g., places where a road traffic accident or a fire has occurred, often become meeting places of different kinds of actors. Some of these actors are organized, others are not. The former consist mainly of professional emergency responders affiliated with some kind of emergency response organization. They are trained and equipped to deal with emergency situations, and the situation at an incident site is broadly familiar to them. The latter, on the other hand, lack relevant organizational affiliation, and are unprepared, and in most cases untrained, for the conditions prevailing at incident sites. Such unaffiliated responders can be there for several different reasons. Some of them are there as helpers, volunteering to help victims as well as other responders (Fritz & Mathewson 1957).

The interaction between these two kinds of actors is the object of study in this paper. The contact between them is studied from the perspective of the organized actors. It is a well-known fact among researchers that unaffiliated helpers are regarded as a mixed blessing, as both a resource and a problem, by professional responders (Barsky et al. 2007). This paradox may, however, be looked at and managed in different ways. Differences in this respect are largely due to organizational factors. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how unaffiliated volunteers are managed by different professional responders, with different organizational affiliations, at incident sites.

The organizational affiliation of the professional responders is of crucial importance to understand the encounters between the different actors. Therefore, the theoretical point of departure in this paper is organization theory. The aim is mainly theoretical. My intention is to put the encounters at incident sites in an organizational context, and to identify similarities as well as differences in the way different professional responders, with different organizational affiliations, relate to unaffiliated volunteers.

The empirical data material is limited (since I am in the beginning of the data collection process). It consists of only three interviews, one for each organization studied. The three most common emergency response organizations at incident sites, at least in Sweden where the study was carried out, are the police, the fire and rescue services, and the ambulance services. Interviews were carried out with personnel from these three organizations regarding their interaction with unaffiliated helpers at incident sites. The translations of the interview transcripts are mine.

The object of study is delimited in two respects: (1) The “incidents” studied are not “extraordinary events” like disasters or catastrophes, but relatively minor “everyday accidents” like fires or road traffic accidents. This means that the object of study is also much more temporally delimited than a disaster (Dynes 1970). (2) The interactions in focus here include just two parties, professional emergency responders and unorganized helpers, not all the different parties that often “converge” at the scene of a disaster (Drabek & McEntire 2002; Quarantelli 1993; Rodríguez et al. 2006).

The disposition of the paper is simple, and looks as follows: In the second section a theoretical framework for the analysis is presented. In the third section, which makes up the lion’s share of the paper, interaction at incident sites are analysed, under three subheadings. In the fourth and last section some theoretical conclusions are made.

Organizations, boundary spanners, and external relations

More than four decades ago, organisational scholars identified the central problem for organizations as one of coping with uncertainty (Thompson 1967), and early research showed that uncertainty is to a large extent absorbed at the external boundaries of organizations (March & Simon 1958). The degree of uncertainty may, however, vary depending on both the nature of the tasks and the environment of the organization. Tasks consisting of the management of unpredictable events in dynamic environments create particularly uncertain conditions. Such are the circumstances under which emergency response organizations work.

Uncertainty generated in the environment is managed by boundary spanning personnel (Adams 1976; Aldrich & Herker 1977). For some boundary spanners, such as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) and persons working with interactive service (Leidner 1993), the interaction with organizationally unaffiliated individuals is of primary importance for their work: The encounters with clients are necessary for street-level bureaucrats working in public organizations such as employment agencies, and interactive service workers like salespersons or hairdressers cannot perform their tasks adequately without dealing with customers. The activities taking place in the technical core of the organizations presuppose the interaction, and the organizational structure, vocabulary, rules, procedures, training etc. are designed to facilitate this kind of interaction. However, all external contacts are not equally important for organizations. Some social relations are crucial, others are less so. I therefore suggest a distinction between boundary spanners' external relations, where some are of *primary task-related importance* and others of *secondary task-related importance*.

The nature of the relations – of primary or secondary importance – is crucial to understand what goes on in the interaction. However, other factors may be equally important, especially for the understanding of relations of secondary task-related importance. Different kinds of organizations function, as a result of a number of different circumstances – the nature of the tasks carried out in the technical core of the organization, the character of the collective identity in the organization, the skills and training of its personnel, demands from the environment, etc. – according to different *institutional logics* (Thornton & Ocasio 2008). It means that they have certain cultural and symbolic characteristics, and act in accordance with certain specific frames of reference. The institutional logic of an organization affects the *relevance structure* (Schutz 1970) of its individual members; their attention is selective, and only phenomena assessed as relevant within a given domain of relevance attract their attention. Institutional logics as well as individual relevance structures affects the external relations of the boundary spanners.

Professional emergency responders are the boundary spanners of emergency response organizations. They are trained and equipped to deal with emergencies more or less as a matter of routine. To them the incident site is a place of work, and the situation there is usually broadly familiar and regarded as part of everyday life. They meet mainly two kinds of unorganized individuals at incident sites, the victims of the incident and the unaffiliated helpers. The importance of the interaction with victims and helpers respectively may vary; to some professional responders the former, but not the latter, is of primary task-related importance, to other professionals it may be vice versa, or both interactions may be of primary task-related importance.

To the professional responders, the incident site is both a meeting place and a broadly familiar place of work. To the unaffiliated helpers, on the other hand, the incident site is a temporary meeting place where the whole situation is completely out of the ordinary and the routines of everyday life has been disrupted. Thus, the two parties meet with diametrically opposed interpretations: One view the incident site as part of everyday life, the other as a total departure from everyday life.

Interaction at incident sites

All three interviewed professional emergency responders regard the unaffiliated helpers as a resource in two respects: They can be used as a source of information and as helpers for practical assistance. The unaffiliated volunteers appear, however, to be more *important* for some emergency response organizations than for others. The main reason for that is the division of labour between the three organizations. It is true that some tasks are common to them: All three organizations have the saving of lives as their first priority, and when the police or firemen arrive at an incident place before the ambulance, the first thing they do, if needed, is to start life-saving measures. Another common task is to seal off the incident site, which is done, if needed, by the first professional responders to arrive. Apart from that, the tasks are divided between the organizations. While firemen and ambulance personnel is involved in saving lives and preventing injury to people and damage to property within the incident area, the task of the

police is to provide an infrastructure within which the fire-fighters and paramedics can work undisturbed. The police respondent makes an illuminating illustration:

When you arrive at for example a scene of fire, then the firemen are putting out the fire. We take care of the rest... 'Is anyone left in the building? Who live in the house? Was everybody home?'... Then interrogate the woman in whose apartment the fire started. That is what the police does. The fire and rescue services puts out the fire, we take care of the rest (Police).

The task of "taking care of the rest" at an incident site means that the police has more contacts with, and are more dependent on, unaffiliated volunteers than do the other emergency response organizations. The respondent from the fire and rescue services says considerably less than the other two interviewees about interaction with unaffiliated responders, clearly attributing far less importance to them than does the interviewee from the police. The respondent from the ambulance services falls somewhere in-between.

Unaffiliated volunteers as a source of information

The police needs unaffiliated responders, as well as other bystanders and victims, as a source of information not only regarding the immediate situation at the incident site, but also for the investigation concerning the cause of the incident (and regarding whether a crime has been committed). The other two organizations have a narrower focus. The fire and rescue services use unaffiliated volunteers as a source of information above all when the firemen are the first professional responders to arrive at an incident site.

It is quite concrete questions about what has happened, to know what we are going to do. So often it is questions like: 'Is there anyone left?' or 'Have you seen anyone else?' or if a house is burning 'What is it like, what does it look like inside?' Very practical questions (Fire and rescue services).

The ambulance personnel are looking for the same kind of practical information from the unaffiliated responders:

Yes, we always ask them if they have done anything. If they have taken the patient, the injured, out of the car is important to know... If they have pulled them out of the car there is a fair chance that the head has tilted forward and rotated. Then it may result in paralysis... Then we ask if they know the patient, if they know who it is. The identity (Ambulance services).

Thus, the firemen and ambulance personnel have a narrower *assessment of relevance* than do the policemen, regarding the information that the unaffiliated volunteers can provide. The degree of *time pressure* in the interaction with unaffiliated helpers is also stronger for firemen and paramedics than for policemen, which is illuminated in the following statement:

You always ask what they have done. But you haven't got too much time. When you arrive you focus on the patient. But you ask quickly, you want a quick report of the situation (Ambulance services).

The differences between the interviewees regarding their views on the unaffiliated volunteers as a source of information reflect a difference between the three organizations concerning their relation to volunteers. For the police this interaction is of primary task-related importance. For the fire and rescue services and ambulance services, on the other hand, the interaction with unaffiliated helpers is of secondary task-related importance. For them, the interaction with the victims, rather than the helpers, is of primary importance.

Unaffiliated volunteers as practical assistants

All three respondents agree that unaffiliated responders can be useful for practical assistance, in situations when the resources of the emergency response organizations are not sufficient. Then the volunte-

ers are useful as a complement. The interviewee from the ambulance services elucidates this:

In a county like Jämtland (a sparsely populated area in Sweden, author's remark), our resources are scarce. [When there is 70 kilometres between two ambulances] then you are alone for quite a while at an incident site. Only one ambulance crew of two persons, and five injured. Then it is a bit hard to make priorities. Then you want helpers who start to help (Ambulance services).

The three respondents all give examples of rational and relevant actions taken by unaffiliated responders. However, the assessments of the interviewees from the police and the fire and rescue services are generally more positive than that of the respondent from the ambulance services. The latter is not altogether negative, but ambivalent in his attitude towards the volunteers. This has to do with the *character of the tasks* performed by the volunteers.

Regarding the tasks of the fire and rescue services, the actions of unaffiliated volunteers (e.g. trying to put out a fire) largely come to an end as soon as the firemen arrives. There is, however, quite a lot of police tasks that can be done by unaffiliated helpers:

Carry stuff, or putting up ropes... When we had a large fire, then we could say 'Help me put up this tape between those poles!', 'Can you fetch some water?', 'Can you make some coffee?' [When a road traffic accident has occurred:] 'Do you know who was in the car?' 'Yes, I do.' 'Can you get them all together and sit down over there, and we will be with you in a moment' (Police).

Ambulance personnel can use unaffiliated helpers for non-caring tasks, like carrying stretchers, or just sitting with an injured person, holding his/her hand and talking to him/her. When it comes to treatment and caring tasks, the situation becomes, however, more problematic. These tasks require a certain degree of skills and training, and the *consequences of incompetent actions* may be serious. That is the main reason for the more sceptical attitude of the respondent from the ambulance services, compared with the other two interviewees. It is a problem for the paramedics that they dare not fully trust the skills of people they do not know. And even if an unaffiliated volunteer can prove that s/he is a nurse or physician, s/he is not allowed to take much responsibility: "if they are physicians they are still not allowed to take over any responsibility, they are assigned simpler tasks. You use them, but you have control over them" (Ambulance). Sometimes a volunteer may claim to be a nurse or physician, but have no means of proving it. That is another situation when suspicion may arise, because ambulances contain goods that are especially liable to be stolen:

You do not completely trust everybody on the site as helpers... We have had several cases with people claiming to be nurses, and all they wanted was to get drugs. To steal the bag with medicine (Ambulance services).

Thus, even if all three interviewees give examples of the usefulness of unaffiliated responders for practical assistance their emphases vary. Unorganized responders are most useful to the police, considerably less so to the fire and rescue services, and are clearly a mixed blessing for the ambulance services. The difference between the interviewees is due to the division of labour between the three organizations: The police have a number of tasks suitable for unaffiliated helpers, the fire and rescue services have few such tasks, and even if the ambulance services do have suitable tasks, other tasks require skills and training, making incompetent action potentially harmful. Ambulances also have resources liable to be stolen, which adds to the suspicious attitude towards unaffiliated helpers from ambulance personnel.

Leadership by diversion

The view on unaffiliated responders as a source of information and as practical assistants emphasises, to a large extent, the positive contributions the volunteers can make to the emergency response. There remains, however, also the other side of the coin, the helpers as a problem, to be accounted for. The interviewees express this mainly in terms of leadership and management.

Leadership at incident sites is mainly about creating order and coordinating actions, and this goes for

both professional and unaffiliated responders. Regarding the latter, leaders have to express themselves in more plain and explicit terms than otherwise, because the volunteers lack knowledge about work at incident sites. Apart from that, the demands on leadership of unaffiliated helpers, in order to create order and achieve coordination, are about the same as those on leadership of professional responders.

There is, however, one circumstance that places additional demands on leadership of unaffiliated responders. To them, the whole situation at an incident site is something completely out of the ordinary, and constitutes a total disruption of the routines of everyday life. This may result in a state of paralysis, when a (sometimes quite large) group of people are very excited and upset, but nevertheless just stands still, doing nothing. They want to do something, but take no initiative of their own. Such a situation may constitute a potential problem for the professional responders. Then it may become the task of the leaders to restore something of the security and normality of everyday life to such a group. This is done by keeping them busy, by giving them a task to perform, regardless of whether it is of technical importance for the emergency response or not. The interviewee from the police gives an example from a search for a missing person:

Often we try not to get relatives involved. But sometimes relatives, they do not want to sit idly. Then it is better to bring them with you... If they really, really just want to do something, even if you realise that they are too confused, then you give them an area where it is unlikely to find the missing person. Just give them an area to search (Police).

The respondent from the fire and rescue services gives an example from a large fire, with a large crowd of bystanders, when the incident commander asked:

‘Anybody wants to help?’, and one hundred people stepped forward, everybody wanted to help. ‘OK, empty this house of all its furniture!’ So everybody started to carry furniture, they were not in our way, they carried out their task, they made a contribution and we were able to focus on our tasks.

Even if the volunteers are able to make a substantial contribution, the main function of this kind of leadership is to divert the attention of the volunteers away from the abnormal circumstances, and to channel their energy in constructive directions. The need for this kind of leadership seems to be equally important in all the three emergency responder organizations.

Conclusions

Regardless of organizational affiliation, all three interviewees view unaffiliated responders as a resource for information and practical assistance, but also as a potential problem. The problematic side of the coin is caused partly by the unaffiliated helpers’ lack of skills and training, partly by their interpretation of the incident site as a place where the rules and routines of everyday life has been disrupted. The latter aspect may sometimes make it necessary for the leaders of the emergency response organizations to practice “leadership by diversion”, in order to restore a sense of everyday normality.

Apart from these common traits, the relations between the three emergency response organizations at the incident site is characterised by division of labour. That is the most basic reason behind the organizations’ different attitudes towards the unaffiliated helpers. For the fire and rescue services and the ambulance services the interaction with the victims is of primary task-related importance, whereas the relations with the helpers is of secondary importance. For the police, on the other hand, the relation with the unaffiliated responders is of primary task-related importance.

This is reflected in a number of aspects of the interaction with the unaffiliated volunteers. The policemen have the most extensive and widely defined relations with the unaffiliated helpers. The police also have a larger number of tasks that can be carried out by volunteers, and they have a wider assessment of relevance regarding the information the unaffiliated responders can provide, and policemen obtain this information under less time pressure than do the other professional responders. Therefore, it is

hardly surprising that the interviewee from the police regarded the unaffiliated responders as more important than did the other two respondents. The fire and rescue services seems to be least involved with the volunteers and the ambulance services comes somewhere in-between.

A slightly different pattern was identified regarding the degree of ambiguity of the attitudes towards the unaffiliated volunteers. The respondents from the police and the fire and rescue services showed an almost unambiguously positive attitude, whereas the interviewee from the ambulance services had a much more ambiguous view. There are two main reasons for the latter's more negative attitude: First, treatment and caring tasks require a certain degree of skills and training, and the consequences of incompetent actions may be harmful to the patients. Secondly, ambulances carry goods that are especially liable to be stolen, and therefore sometimes attract unaffiliated individuals with other intentions than to be of assistance.

Thus, even if the nature of the relations to the unaffiliated helpers – of primary or secondary task-related importance – is crucial to understand the interaction between professional and unaffiliated responders, it is not the only factor that influences the interaction. The nature of the tasks – the degree of skills and training required – as well as the kind of resources – liable to be stolen or not – may be important. To understand this theoretically we need other concepts than the ones so far employed in the analysis.

Relevance structures and institutional logics

Since the interaction with unaffiliated responders at the incident site is of primary task-related importance to the police, their interaction can be described as one between street-level bureaucrats and their clients (Lipsky 1980), and the organization provides a vocabulary, administrative categories, routines, procedures, education, training, etc., in order to facilitate the interaction. This is not true to the same extent for the fire and rescue services and the ambulance services. They are trained to deal with the victims of the incident rather than the unaffiliated helpers. Their relation to the latter is of secondary task-related importance, and is better understood with their respective institutional logics as the point of departure.

Of the three emergency response organizations under study here the fire and rescue services has the most narrowly delimited interaction with the unaffiliated volunteers. In most cases the tasks of the firemen require little or no communication with the unaffiliated helpers. The organization is characterised by a *logic of incident control*; the purpose of their work is to manage an incident in its totality, and to prevent injury to people and damage to property or the environment. This affects the relevance structure of the firemen, and in this context the unaffiliated volunteers are hardly relevant as helpers and co-workers, only as sources of narrowly defined practical information.

The ambulance services is part of the health care system and is characterised by a *logic of medicine*, where the health and well-being of the patient is in focus. However, most care-related activities take place in specific, purposefully designed premises with specialised technical equipment, and are carried out by skilled personnel with a specialised competence. This is far from the reality at incident sites. Ambulances do bring some equipment, but little personnel. An ambulance crew consists of two persons and they may sometimes be in great need of help from unaffiliated volunteers. These are, however, strangers to the paramedics. The people the ambulance personnel are dependent on for practical assistance may be incompetent, and their actions may be harmful or fatal to the patient. Or, rather than having an intention to help, their intention may in extreme cases be to steal the equipment. It is this combination of dependence and uncertainty that is the reason for the ambivalent attitude of our employee from the ambulance services towards the unaffiliated responders.

The policemen's interaction with the unaffiliated helpers is best understood with the nature of the interaction – of primary task-related importance – as the point of departure. But in addition to that the tasks of the police seem to be characterised by a *communicative logic*, more generally. A large part of

their work consists of contacts with the public in general. The nature of the policemen's interaction with the unaffiliated responders is, thus, amplified by the institutional logic of the organization.

The interaction patterns between professional and unaffiliated responders at an incident site are complicated. Three emergency response organizations, each with its own tasks and its own assessments of relevance, interact with all kinds of unaffiliated helpers. It is the nature of the interaction – of primary or secondary task-related importance – in combination with the institutional logics characterising the organizations involved that ultimately affects what the interaction between professional and unaffiliated responders will look like.

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