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# Hearts on Fire: An Exploration of the Emotional World of Firefighters

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## ABSTRACT

Firefighting ranks among the nation's most hazardous and stressful occupations. As emergency rescue workers, firefighters are often called on to intervene and mitigate tragic and traumatic emergencies. In an effort to assist these emergency workers, several stress intervention models are currently employed in the contemporary fire service. However, most work from an individual perspective rather than employing sociological systems perspectives.

This essay introduces insights into the emotional world of firefighters, the types of incidents that elicit the most intense emotions in them, and how they cope with and manage these emotions through the utilization of personal, experiential, social, and work support systems. Further, this article discusses how the sociologist might better prepare himself/herself to effectively enter this work culture, design and implement interventions, and what those interventions should emphasize.

## Introduction

"Firefighting ranks among the most stressful occupations in the American workplace" (Gist and Woodall 1995:763). However, the quality of information surrounding the matter is open to expansion in order to make positive and lasting intervention more probable. We are all constantly attempting to make sense of our world. Firefighters are no exception. The unique feature of the firefighters' emotional world is that their attempts to make sense of the world at large and their work world are in many ways

challenged by the accelerated manner in which this cognitive exercise must be performed.

Fire departments and emergency medical service providers have started to acknowledge the extreme toll that stress and stress-related maladies take on their valued personnel. Many are starting to address the problem through stress management training, physical training programs, nutrition awareness, critical incident stress debriefing teams, support from employee assistance programs (E.A.P.'s) and further posttraumatic stress disorder research.

When working with firefighter populations in particular and, for that matter, any client population, sociologists, psychologists, counselors, and social workers would be wise to ask three very important questions;

- Who is my client?
- What does my client want?
- How will I know when I'm finished?

On the surface, these appear to be straight forward questions with straight forward answers. However, as with most things, these questions are infinitely more complicated than they initially appear.

### **Who is My Client?**

As a professional firefighter, it became apparent to me that these questions were not being asked by the mental health professionals who were attempting to enter our work-culture and assist us with the mitigation and management of secondary trauma victimization. We would frequently encounter well-meaning but perhaps misinformed counselor types who would come to the fire house after a significant incident and attempt an intervention. Finding out where the fire station is located, after an event, is not an example of what is meant by "Who is my client?" Identifying the client, in this case the fire service and its members, is a highly complex task. This task requires effort, commitment, and motivation. As public servants, firefighters don't simply wait until there's an emergency and then show up at the door. We are members of the communities we serve. We work with school kids. We present topics at the old folks home. We have our trucks washed at the local gas station to help various organizations raise funds. We go to the local high school football games. If you want to assist us with our well-being, get to know us, get involved in our culture, come ride along some night. Don't just show up at our door when you think that we might need you.

### **What Does My Client Want?**

Many from the mental health community have inadvertently added some unwarranted words to this pertinent question and in some cases have completely changed the question. Examples include: "What do I think my

client wants?" and "What does my client need?" Both variations are dangerous on several fronts. One, this is no way to build rapport with firefighters. Two, this makes one wonder whose needs are being satisfied: the counselor's or the fire department members'? Three, some would say this borders on unethical behavior. If you want to know what the client wants, ask him, her, or the group. Meet the client where the client is and explore their feelings, emotions, and values, most advisably, prior to the major event.

### **Building a Bridge**

My respect for firefighters increases with each new contact. These contacts come in various manners and in many different scenarios. Many I meet by design during research, teaching, speaking, and other professional pursuits. However, many acquaintances are made by chance. Each chance meeting can be likened to meeting a cousin that you didn't know you had. The common denominator for the comfort and comradeship we share is, of course, the fire service. We are all as unique as our particular personalities and departments, but we are all so much alike in our firefighting and emergency medical experiences. We have all been to battle. We have all shared in the joys of victory. We have all been impacted, positively and negatively, by our "defeats." We share a common bond. We have all gone the extra mile in the service of our fellow human beings.

It was, in fact, a critical incident and the subsequent impacts of a critical incident that led me to graduate school. While serving as the Fire Chief of a small Arizona fire district, my friend and assistant chief's son was killed in a truck versus motorcycle accident just down the street from our fire house. Our collective efforts were futile and Charlie died that night. As the leader of the organization, a new father, and a friend, I witnessed and experienced firsthand the impacts that a catastrophe of this manner imparts on firefighters, organizations, and communities. It was shortly after this experience that I opted to apply to graduate school, not knowing exactly what I was looking for, but definitely wanting to seek my own truth. I knew I was not happy with the well-meaning mental health clinicians telling me what our fire department needed. I was not happy being told I was traumatized because I cared. I wanted to be a bridge, at least in my little part of the universe, between the mental health community and the fire service. It was my desire to seek answers from the perspective of a firefighter.

Graduate school offered many research opportunities in the critical incident stress area. One such research opportunity was "Hearts on Fire: An Exploration of the Emotional World of Firefighters." This descriptive, qualitative study, in many ways, represented the culmination of many years of formal education and experiential immersion into the world and culture of professional and volunteer firefighting.

Sixteen years as a professional and reserve firefighter, a student of fire sciences, instructor of fire sciences (in both the professional and volunteer circles), and fire-related consulting served as the foundation for the immersion of this researcher into the fire department culture. Teaching, working, and studying fire-related issues nationwide have afforded me with a multitude of rich experiences in the world I was examining, the world where I live. These experiential opportunities have allowed me to enter into rich and rewarding fire service friendships from coast to coast in this country and internationally. It was from these relationships and experiences that the data was drawn. It was from these brave individuals' deep wells of knowledge and emotion that I drank.

Who were these men who decided to share themselves? They have families; they have wives and children; they are single; they are fathers and grandfathers; they are providers. They have dreams, hopes, fears, and questions. They are all of us in many respects. However, they are truly unique. They are men who, at more than one time in their professional lives, have had to challenge many of their deepest personal fears. They are men who have had to make decisions on who would live and who would surely die. They have seen the emotional pinnacles of life, and they are men who have also seen just how temporary and fragile life truly is. They are men who in many respects know the joys that life can bring due to the fact that they know and appreciate the horrors that can abruptly bring life to an end. Demographics are of little importance. These men are Americans. They are your neighbors, uncles, husbands, friends, brothers, and sons. Many would say that these men are America's Bravest. They would humbly submit that they are honored to serve.

The fact that firefighters will be exposed to critical incidents is understood and accepted. These exposures to the misfortunes of others are not only unavoidable in emergency work, they represent the very essence of the enterprise and it is this assistance, given to those in need, that provides one of its primary vehicles for effective reward (Gist and Obadal 1994).

The study was undertaken in an effort to examine the apparent emotional resiliency within the population of firefighters and whether or not such resiliency was a product of the firefighters experiential continuum. This goal was pursued by addressing the following research questions;

1. What emotions do firefighters commonly experience in critical emergency situations?
2. What emergency situation circumstances commonly elicit those emotions?
3. How do they manage those emotions?
4. What are some of the typical emotion management strategies that they utilize?

Interviews were conducted with firefighters from across the U.S. in an effort to ascertain firefighters' viewpoints in reference to the research questions.

## **Findings**

When looking at the interview excerpts in an effort to determine what types of emergency situations elicited intense emotions in the firefighter population, it was imperative that the emotional bridge between the helping professional's personal and work lives be examined and taken into consideration. As humans, we continuously process incoming data by locating and accessing existing files in which to place it, give those data depth, and assign meaning to it. This is best explained in Piaget's schemata formation, assimilation and accommodation theory. The incoming data either fits neatly into our existing schema (assimilation), or the schemata must be modified in some manner in order to accommodate the new information. This, of course, points out that it is next to impossible to separate the work-life from the home-life.

## **Personalizing the Event Makes It Personal**

The study noted that the emergencies having the greatest impacts and eliciting the most intense emotions in the sample group were those in which the firefighter almost immediately made a tie, a connection, with the victim and a person (usually their child, significant other, or parent) close to them in their personal life.

Statements such as: "All I could see was my own daughter," "She was the same age as my daughter and had on an identical outfit," and "He was approximately the same age as my father" poignantly demonstrated how readily we attempt to connect new input with our existing knowledge in an effort to understand. It is at this juncture that the firefighter becomes most vulnerable to emotional trauma; it is also at this point that the firefighter becomes open for an emotional growth experience. Whichever the case, by connecting the work place tragedy to a highly personal, intensely important schema, the firefighter has all but guaranteed that the event will become a lifelong memory. This is not to say that forgetting, and even memory suppression, is a recommendation, only that by personalizing the event, the event becomes personal.

This personalization was further demonstrated by the emotional ties that were almost instantaneously constructed during efforts to save a child. Statements such as: "I could not turn loose of her," and "I had this emotional tie with this child and could not cut loose" served to demonstrate just how rapidly and intensely these victim/rescuer bonds are formed.

It was of little surprise that the senseless deaths of children brought forth the most intense emotions from firefighters. This would probably hold true across the entire strata of our population. What would the public think of firefighters if this were not the case? However, it is the senseless piece of the equation that intensified the emotions, making them extremely difficult to assimilate.

### **Emotions for Hire**

Hochschild (1983) contended that the emotions of workers become commodified when these acts are sold for a wage and are thereby estranged from the individual. The emotions of the firefighter are commodified to the extent that they are paid to control their emotions in the completion of emergency tasks. However, one must question whether the emotions elicited by secondary trauma exposure are, in fact, the same emotions that they have contracted to control. If firefighters are, in fact, paid to control (or manage) their emotions in the interest of efficient and professional customer service, who, in fact, owns the remaining emotions upon the completion of the emergency task. It becomes a matter of benefit and burden. The firefighter has superficially sold his or her emotions, but seemingly only for a short time. Upon completion of the task, the remnants of the emotions remain the burden of the firefighter to manage and deal with. Should this theory hold water, management's role would include assisting the firefighter in the short- and long-range management of his or her emotions since the citizens served by the agency reaped the benefit.

### **Enter The Sociologist**

A great number of fire department administrators recognize their responsibility and are extremely committed to assisting their members via Employee Assistance Programs, Chaplain Programs, Critical Incident Stress Debriefing and Stress Management programs. Many fire departments are taking definitive steps to promote healthy organizations and are committed to the implementation and utilization of Health and Wellness programs. The sociologists can bring the organizational piece to many of these programs that currently focus their interventions at the individual level.

### **Emotional Community**

The research subjects further related several of the manners in which they manage emergency scene emotions. The interview excerpts mentioned strategies such as:

- “keeping a clear head,
- not viewing the victims as people,
- talking their feelings over at the fire house after the call,

- not dwelling on it,
- writing their emotions off as the cost of doing business,
- crying,
- educating supporting family members regarding critical incident stress and the dynamics of secondary trauma exposure.”

If this subject population was representative of firefighters across America, we are looking at a profession of highly dedicated individuals who recognize that they are emotionally impacted by the duties they perform. However, we are also looking at a group who is unafraid to examine their emotions, acknowledge them, accept and embrace them, and actively seek solutions to any of those emotions that complicate their lives and work after the emergency is over.

### **Support Resources**

The resources available to the firefighter include: support systems, values and beliefs, as well as work relationships. It is at the post emergency juncture that firefighters begin to assess:

- the way they wish they felt,
- the way they tried to feel,
- the way they feel,
- the way they show what they feel (Hochschild 1983).

As the firefighter answers these questions, he/she begins to appraise and prioritize the available social support systems, apply existing values and beliefs to the current emotional state, and determine whether to utilize his personal social support system or work relationship social support system.

It can be speculated that because of the importance of initial attachments, intimate relationships remain critical and are valued very highly because they are furnished by those we love and trust. Work relationships can also be included. The fire service enjoys a closeness and intimacy that most professions do not share. It is within this family atmosphere that close relationships are fostered, respect is built, and role-model/mentor relationships are developed as the firefighter establishes upward contacts.

### **Firefighters Need Heroes Too**

Firefighters, as with most emergency services workers, are often looked to as role models within the community. This is a high standard enjoyed and embraced by the majority within our service. This lofty perspective, imposed by both the public we serve and by ourselves, often creates a desire to be infallible. This infallibility becomes an expectation both on and off the emergency scene. Failure, in all its relative forms, becomes somewhat of a

self-fulfilling prophecy. When standards and expectations are set inordinately high, any set-back is magnified.

These high expectations come in many forms and occupy various locations on a very long continuum. These expectations arise on the emergency scene when we criticize and critique ourselves for: not getting to a victim soon enough to effect a rescue; when extended rescue efforts fail; when we ask ourselves what else could we, or should we, have done.

### **Heart, Brains, Courage**

Firefighters possess no extraordinary emotional powers; they are simply men and women who have chosen to serve their fellow human beings at what is often their most critical juncture. What they actually are is what their chosen professions has allowed them to become. Research (Woodall 1996; Gist and Woodall 1995) indicates that firefighters frequently do possess the skill that their rigorous and emotionally challenging work requires. The metaphor that Richard Gist, the consulting psychologist for the Kansas City Fire and Police Department, so eloquently expresses is from the "Wizard of Oz." As we all know, the heart, brain, and courage that the Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion sought in their journey to Oz were already possessed by each. The fact is, they had the tools they desired even before they began the journey.

"**Hearts on Fire**" theorizes that it is the very nature of a firefighter's journey, the seemingly endless exposure to human pain and suffering, that has afforded them with the opportunity to appreciate the joys of life by knowing and understanding human tragedy. By experiencing, although most times vicariously, the emotional and physical pain of the sick, injured, and dying, they become more capable of appreciating the true meaning of life. These resilient emotional skills serve them both at home and on the job. These skills afford them the emotional skills required to function in dangerous and tragic environments. By the same token, these skills also afford them the opportunity to take that little extra moment to appreciate the joys of life, understanding all the while just how fleeting those joys can be.

### **Sociological Implications**

This research was a mechanism from which to explore how firefighters process the emotions elicited by the vital work they perform and to discuss the apparent emotional resiliency of firefighters. "**Hearts on Fire**" explored a sample of the emotions that emergency work elicits in firefighters in an attempt to better clarify our collective understanding of how they manage their emotional environment. The work was grounded and validated in the literature of human development, sociology, psychology, and systems theory.

When we, clinical sociologists, are requested to enter the world of the

firefighter, and the worlds of other emergency workers as well, we would be advised to keep several critical concepts in mind:

- Keep an open mind. Don't expect others to process at the same pace. Remember, just because something may appear traumatic to you, it may not be particularly traumatic to someone who has processed the same type of scenario many times.
- We are also encouraged to meet the client where the client is, that is, approach the issue, in this case secondary trauma exposure, from the client's perspective.
- It is also advisable to work from the client's strengths rather than from their weaknesses.

Sociologists would be most wise to look for what the client is doing right, what has worked well for the client in the past, and utilize those strengths to formulate an intervention that is structured for success from the onset.

There is little doubt that firefighters experience a great deal of emotional stress by virtue of their work. How we, the community of clinical sociologists, assist them in this management will be greatly impacted by our knowledge of their world.

### **How Will I Know When I'm Finished? A Work in Progress**

We seek this knowledge through research and, in the case of "Hearts on Fire," by immersion into the firefighters' culture. We seek this knowledge through other forms of qualitative and quantitative research. We seek this knowledge from those who have their feet planted firmly in both worlds. What we are finding in this noble profession is a group of highly dedicated and capable individuals, who collectively represent the community's safety net. These individuals recognize that they are emotionally impacted by the duties they perform. Many would claim that they have been positively impacted. We are looking at a group of professionals who are unafraid to examine the genesis and results of the emotions that their work elicits, acknowledge them, accept them, and actively seek solutions to any of those emotions that can potentially complicate their lives and work after the emergency is over.

As interventions are planned, the systems perspective represents the sociologist's most appropriate and most valuable tool. We recognize that all individuals are but components of the greater system. In the fire service the system is represented by the individual, the work team, fellow workers at the fire house, the leaders of the department, and, finally, the profession and its proud history and traditions. All of these components should be examined and taken into consideration when designing an intervention or an intervention program.

Professional firefighters enjoy what can truly be described as an extended family. As sociologists we should encourage and enhance the firefighter's utilization of social support systems, pointing out the value and utility of such a strategy. Firefighters are problem solvers. Not only can they effectively solve serious problems, they often are called upon to solve serious problems under extremely adverse conditions. These abilities can be incorporated into interventions strategies. The fire service is permeated with strong and capable leaders. We could reinforce sound leadership and followership theory and practice. And finally, we could encourage firefighters to take pause, reflect on who they are and what they do, and honor themselves and each other as the general population frequently does. Finally, we can honor them, applauding their collective efforts and most importantly we can assist them in working toward their collective strengths rather than focusing on what we think they need. Any intervention should focus on their perspective, one we must become more familiar with and comfortable with if we are ever to effectively enter their culture.

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