



Summary

*Beyond tough appearances.
The impact of fire service culture in
the processing of critical incidents*

Karin Dangermond
Promotion: 18 April 2023
Universiteit voor Humanistiek, Utrecht

Introduction

While performing their duties, firefighters deal with incidents that are dramatic and potentially traumatic. Usually, firefighters experience critical incidents as a collective, because they almost always work in a crew which in turn is part of a larger whole – the fire station. The culture within the crew and the fire station affects how these incidents are experienced and processed, and it has a major impact on firefighters' well-being and functioning. Regarding the processing of critical incidents, it is unclear how this is being affected by the fire service culture. This dissertation research aims to generate insight into the role of fire service culture when firefighters process critical incidents.

Since little research has been done on the role of fire service culture in handling critical incidents, an inductive exploratory study of fire service practice was conducted prior to the actual dissertation research. This preliminary study – aimed to identify themes emerging in fire service practice concerning fire service culture in general and the processing of critical incidents in particular – revealed four themes about firefighter culture that are important for the subsequent dissertation research: 1. Aspects of experiencing incidents as so critical that these incidents have an impact on firefighters and their crew; 2. Informal peer support from colleagues in the crew or station; 3. The role of humour; and 4. The differences between noncareer and career firefighters in experiencing critical incidents and the role of informal peer support in processing them. These themes provided the basis for the research questions of the dissertation. Furthermore, during the preliminary study, the suggestion arose that the concept of social ecology might be appropriate to gain more insight into the significance of fire service culture in processing critical incidents for individual firefighters, particularly for understanding their resilience against the impact of critical incidents. For this reason, in this research fire service culture is understood in relation to social ecology.

The main question of the dissertation reads:

How does fire service culture as described by firefighters affect the processing of critical incidents?

To answer this main question, the following sub-questions were posed:

1. Why do firefighters experience specific incidents that occur during their work as so critical that these incidents affect them and their crew?
2. What role does informal peer support play in helping firefighters cope with critical incidents?
3. What role does humour play as part of fire service culture in general, and specifically when dealing with critical incidents?
4. What are the differences between noncareer firefighters and career firefighters in terms of experiencing critical incidents and the role of informal peer support in processing such incidents?

To answer the research questions, ethnographic field research was conducted with an exploratory character that centred on the perspective of the firefighters themselves. A total of 88 participants were interviewed, and 20 participating observations took place with six fire crews. Participants came from 19 career stations and 18 noncareer stations in 12 safety regions.

Why firefighters experience certain incidents as critical and the impact of such incidents on individual firefighters and fire crews

Firefighters inevitably encounter critical incidents as part of their work. Most studies do not investigate why firefighters experience or perceive an incident as critical and which personal and contextual factors play a role. Furthermore, little research has been conducted into the impact of critical incidents on firefighters' private and working lives, as individuals (as first responders and private citizens) and as a collective (the fire crew). This first study provides a more in-depth understanding of this issue.

Whether an incident is experienced as critical depends on the type of incident, the circumstances of the incident and the personal situation. Directly or indirectly, experiencing a critical incident impacts firefighters during and after, both professionally and personally. Experiencing critical incidents affects crew dynamics.

The role of informal peer support in helping firefighters cope with critical incidents

Many firefighters prefer informal peer support to help them cope with critical incidents, but existing research does not clarify enough how such support is given. This second study provides initial evidence of the role of informal peer support in how firefighters cope with critical incidents. Insight is given into why informal peer support is experienced as a supplement to or replacement of a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) session; how informal peer support is perceived at different times and varies per person and crew; how support is received from the collective, an individual colleague (including the crew commander) or a combination of the two; and the different reasons why firefighters do not experience informal support at all.

Firefighters will turn to informal peer support to cope with critical incidents provided that facilitating circumstances are present and there is adherence to certain implicit rules. The collective sharing of memories, whether immediately post-incident or over time, helps firefighters process critical incidents and promotes unit cohesion. Most firefighters reported preferring these informal debriefings to formal sessions. By comparison, a minority of firefighters reported that they did not benefit from the informal interactions at all.

Humour as part of the fire service culture, specifically as part of coping with critical incidents

Although humour plays an essential role in how firefighters perform their work, it is not clear how they experience the role of humour as part of the fire service culture and why they might consider it important when coping with critical incidents. Firefighters are reluctant when it comes to sharing information about the use of humour, which may be why relatively few studies on this subject are available. This third study shows why and how firefighters think humour plays an important role as part of fire service culture in general, and specifically when coping with critical incidents. The first part discusses how firefighters explain the role of humour as part of fire service culture, the various types of humour, the times and occasions when humour is used, and when and how humour discriminates against certain people or excludes them. The second part explains what firefighters consider to be black humour, why they believe this humour helps them to individually and collectively cope with critical incidents, the role that black humour plays in relation to rituals, the boundaries of black humour, and why firefighters consider that their black humour is not intended for outsiders.

Joking and joviality are important elements of Dutch fire service culture. Firefighter humour usually creates unity but can also lead to exclusion. Whether a joke is perceived as funny depends on who makes the joke and the moment, content and frequency of the joke. Black humour is a means to start a conversation and to make it possible to discuss emotions indirectly, and tends to positively influence group dynamics. However, black humour is absent from certain critical incidents because of personal boundaries and unwritten rules. The absence of humour is a sign for the crew commander to pay extra attention to coping.

Why noncareer and career firefighters have different experiences with critical incidents, and the role of informal peer support in processing them

Most studies on firefighters' mental health and experiences with critical incidents are limited to career (i.e., professional) firefighters or at least make no distinction between noncareer and career firefighters. In many Western countries, however, the majority of firefighting personnel consists of noncareer (i.e., volunteer) firefighters. Studies focusing specifically on noncareer firefighters' experiencing of critical incidents or on the impact of the firefighting profession on both categories of firefighters show important differences between the two. The fourth and last study illustrates why a noncareer or a career capacity affects the psychological reactions of firefighters by describing that both experience incidents as critical for different reasons, and how informal peer support differs between the two categories.

Incidents are experienced as critical by both categories of firefighters, albeit for different reasons. Both impact and processing of incidents can be understood in relation to the social ecology in which firefighters work. The mindset with which noncareer and career firefighters ride to an incident, the local bond between the involved firefighters, and previous experiences with critical incidents vary. During their service, career firefighters get support from their peers more readily than noncareer firefighters. Management has less oversight of noncareer firefighters, making it harder to determine whether they need aftercare. Personal environment plays a larger role in the processing of incidents among noncareer firefighters than among career firefighters.

Conclusion

Firefighters experience critical incidents as a collective because they are part of the fire crew and station. The culture within the crew or fire station affects how these incidents are experienced and processed. To generate in-depth insight into the role of fire service culture when firefighters collectively process critical incidents, the resilience potential of fire service culture is researched in relation to the concept of social ecology.

Insight into the interaction of firefighters within their social ecology shows that resilience is influenced by both the individual firefighter and the social cohesion between the crew or station.

- > Due to group expectations, standards and norms that apply to the interpretation and processing of critical incidents, the culture within a crew or station does influence the impact of critical incidents. Conversely, critical incidents influence the culture within a crew or station.
- > A strong mutual bond among the fire crew at the fire station makes that the collective can be considered a social ecology in which the mutual interaction between person and social environment produces informal peer support. While processing critical incidents, firefighters tend to prefer this kind of support. Given the diverging interpretations of incidents as critical and the variety of preferences for processing such incidents, it is important for firefighters to also be able to use support outside their social ecology – such as formal peer support or professional individual care.
- > Through (black) humour resilience is strengthened: it plays a role in building group cohesion and social support and positively influences the group atmosphere. Although humour generally unites, it can also be alienating and divisive.
- > Insight into the interaction of firefighters within their social ecology shows that resilience is influenced by both the individual firefighter and the social cohesion between the crew or station. The social ecologies of noncareer and career firefighters do differ though: the two groups experience incidents as critical for different reasons and there are also differences in the nature and degree of informal peer support. The emergence and continuation of mutual bonds vary between the two capacities, depending on the frequency and duration of meetings and the composition of participants in these meetings.

Practical implications for the fire service

This dissertation research offers insightful knowledge about the fire service culture and the complex reality in which firefighters work. The research produced knowledge regarding the processing of critical incidents by firefighters. This knowledge is needed to better coordinate help and aftercare to the needs of firefighters: more understanding of the unique work culture and the complexity of the fire service profession, both within (safety regions and fire service crews and stations) and outside the fire service (e.g., with mental health professionals) will benefit the personal well-being of firefighters and the firefighting organisation in general.

In the area of aftercare and group cohesion (which are interrelated), research results have several general and specific practical implications for professionals in- and outside the fire service regarding prevention, the availability and resistance against formal peer support, the importance of customising, practical aftercare, the focus on specific stressors for noncareer and career firefighters and unnecessary exposure to severe physical injuries and deaths.

Full dissertation:

